qntm
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ANTIMEMETICS
DIVISION

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There Is No Antimemetics Division

by qntm

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Prologue

SCP-055: [unknown]

Item #: SCP-055

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: Object is kept within a five (5) by five (5) by two point five (2.5) meter square room constructed of cement (fifty (50) centimeter thickness), with a Faraday cage surrounding the cement walls. Access is via a heavy containment door measuring two (2) by two point five (2.5) meters constructed on bearings to ensure door closes and locks automatically unless held open deliberately. Security guards are NOT to be posted outside SCP-055's room. It is further advised that all personnel maintaining or studying other SCP objects in the vicinity try to maintain a distance of at least fifty (50) meters from the geometric center of the room, as long as this is reasonably practical.

Description: SCP-055 is a "self-keeping secret" or "anti-meme". Information about SCP-055's physical appearance as well as its nature, behavior, and origins is self-classifying. To clarify:

- How Site 19 originally acquired SCP-055 is unknown.
- When SCP-055 was obtained, and by whom, is unknown.
- SCP-055's physical appearance is unknown. It is not indescribable, or invisible: individuals are perfectly capable of entering SCP-055's container and observing it, taking mental or written notes, making sketches, taking photographs, and even making audio/video recordings. An extensive log of such observations is on file. However, information about SCP-055's physical appearance "leaks" out of a human mind soon after such an observation. Individuals tasked with describing SCP-055 afterwards find their minds wandering and lose interest in the task; individuals tasked with sketching a copy of a photograph of SCP-055 are unable to remember what the photograph looks like, as are researchers overseeing these tests. Security personnel who have observed SCP-055 via closed-circuit television cameras emerge after a full shift exhausted and effectively amnesiac about the events of the previous hours.

- Who authorized the construction of SCP-055's containment room, why it was constructed in this way, or what the purpose of the described Containment Procedures may be, are all unknown.

- Despite SCP-055's container being easily accessible, all personnel at Site 19 claim no knowledge of SCP-055's existence when challenged.

All of these facts are periodically rediscovered, usually by chance readers of this file, causing a great deal of alarm. This state of concern lasts minutes at most, before the matter is simply forgotten about.

A great deal of scientific data has been recorded from SCP-055, but cannot be studied.

At least one attempt has been made to destroy SCP-055, or possibly move it from containment at Site 19 to another site, meeting failure for reasons unknown.

SCP-055 may present a major physical threat and indeed may have killed many hundreds of personnel, and we would not know it. Certainly it presents a gigantic memetic/mental threat, hence its Keter classification.

Document #055-1: An Analysis of SCP-055

The author puts forward the hypothesis that SCP-055 was never formally acquired by □□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ and is in fact an autonomous or remotely-controlled agent, inserted at Site 19 by an unidentified third party for one or all of the following purposes:

- to silently observe, or interfere with, activities at Site 19
- to silently observe, or interfere with, activities at other SCP locations
- to silently observe, or interfere with, activities of humanity worldwide
- to silently observe, or interfere with, other SCP objects
- to silently observe, or interfere with, □□□□□□□□□□□□

No action to counter any of these potential threats is suggested, or indeed theoretically possible.

Addendum A:

>

> Hey, if this thing really is an "anti-meme", why doesn't the fact that it's an "anti-meme" get wiped? We must be wrong about that somehow. Wait a minute, what if we were to keep notes about what it isn't? Would we remember those? *Bartholomew Hughes, NSA*

Document #055-2: Report of Dr. John Marachek

Survey team #19-055-127BXE was successfully able to enter SCP-055's container and ascertain the appearance and, to some degree, the nature of the object. Notes were taken according to the project methodology (see [redacted]), after which the container was sealed again.

Excerpt from a transcript of personnel debriefing follows:

> Dr. Hughes: Okay, I'm going to need to ask you some questions about number 55 now.
>
> [redacted]: Number what?
>
> Dr. Hughes: SCP object 55. The object you just examined.
>
> [redacted]: Um, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't think we *have* a 55.
>
> Dr. Hughes: Okay, then, [redacted], I'd like you to tell me what you've been doing for the past two hours.
>
> [redacted]: What? I... <subject appears uncomfortable> ... I don't know.
>
> Dr. Hughes: Okay, then, do you remember that we all agreed that it wasn't spherical?
>
> [redacted]: That what wasn't... Oh! Right! It isn't round at all! Object 55 isn't round!
>
> Dr. Hughes: So you remember it now?
>
> [redacted]: Well, no. I mean, I don't know what it is, but I know there is one. It's something you can't remember. And it's not a sphere.
>
> Dr. Hughes: Wait a minute. What's not a sphere?

□□□□□□□: Object 55.

Dr. Hughes: Object what?

□□□□□□□: Doc, do you remember agreeing that something wasn't shaped like a sphere?

Dr. Hughes: Oh, right!

It appears to be possible to remember what SCP-055 is not (negations of fact), and to repeatedly deduce its existence from these memories.

Personnel involved in Survey #19-055-127BXE reported moderate levels of disorientation and psychological trauma associated with cycles of repeated memory and forgetfulness of SCP-055. However, no long-term behavioral or health problems were observed, and psych assessments of survey personnel showed consistent reports of this distress fading over time.

Recommendations: It may be worthwhile to post at least one staff member capable of remembering the existence of SCP-055 to each critical site.

Part I: There Is No Antimemetics Division

We Need To Talk About Fifty-Five

"Can I smoke?"

This time the receptionist narrows her eyes at Marion. "No," she says. "You— No, you can't smoke anywhere on Site 200. Just because it's an administration building doesn't mean we don't have lungs. Or labor law."

Marion notices the exasperation on the young woman's face. "I've asked you that before, haven't I?"

"Twice in the last quarter-hour," the receptionist says. "You must really need a smoke." She's genuinely puzzled at the repeated question, and she's doing a bad job of concealing her puzzlement.

"You think this is like *Memento*, don't you?" Marion offers, charitably. "You think I have no long-term memory, and if I stay in one place for too long I forget why I'm there."

The receptionist is only just old enough to remember that film. "I... guess?"

Marion smiles sympathetically and shakes her head. It's nothing so simple.

Minutes pass. She toys obsessively with her lighter. She is turning fifty this year and slowly greying, well on her way out of "petite" towards "little old lady". In her bag her phone beeps because it's time for a pill, but she tells it to remind her later. There is a slight tremble in her fingers, but that's not age-based infirmity, that's just ordinary nerves. She's nervous because she's here to meet an O5, and O5s are scary. O5s never want to see you for a small thing. It's the end of the world, or nothing.

Finally, forty minutes late, the door to the inner office opens. Four or five high-ranked Foundationers spill out, carrying laptops or briefcases. As a group, they head straight past reception and out to cars which are waiting. Marion recognises a few of the faces— the Site 19 site director, the head recruiter for Western Europe. None of them glance in her direction.

Once they're gone, O5-8's assistant pokes his head around the door. He's twenty-something, improbably youthful, like a teenager stuffed into one of his dad's business shirts. His haircut is barely regulation. In one hand he holds a tablet computer showing his boss's day planner. It's packed. The man evidently does not sleep.

"Marion? You can come through now."

*

The office door closes behind them with an unusually heavy mechanical *clunk*, as if the whole thing is part of a machine built into the office walls. While Marion takes the indicated chair and sets her bag down, the assistant turns and does some confusing additional things to the door, causing it to make several further strange noises. O5s have non-trivial privacy and security requirements.

The office is spacious, but somehow contrives to be dark despite two big corners of window and broad daylight outside. The walls are all bookshelves and dark wood panelling; perfectly stylish, but a style from the Nineties, a little worn, and not yet old enough to be fashionable again.

As for the fellow behind the desk, well, an O5 never looks like you imagine.

Marion takes a deep breath. "So what's the topic? All I got was the meeting invitation, no agenda or subject. I mean, an O5 says 'jump', you jump, but—"

Looking to her right, she notices that the assistant, without saying anything or making any undue noise, has set his tablet down on a table, produced a gun and aimed it at her head. Marion stops talking. She sits still in her chair for a little while, absorbing the change of pace, letting her heart rate rise to a hummingbird's and then start to flatten again.

"Okay?" she hazards. She licks her lips and grips the arm rests, otherwise staying perfectly still, waiting for another prompt. The assistant's face is totally neutral now, like this is just how meetings go. Maybe it is, for people up here.

"Who are you?" O5-8 asks her.

Marion blinks. "What? Oh, God."

"Let me rephrase," O5-8 says. "Marion Wheeler, forty-nine, with loving husband and two boys in tow. Likes camping, hiking and ornithology. Boring mother with perfect, airtight background and financials, as far back as we can examine. And you've got full Foundation credentials which we've never issued, including access to a list of installations and rooms which... some of these locations don't exist, or were torn down decades ago. At least one hasn't been built yet, yet you've got the front door key to it. That's before we get to your SCP access control lists, which I can only term as 'egregious'.

"So you're a spy, and your objectives are misaligned with ours, and Clay wanted to cut Xi-3 loose on you, but I was able to bring him around. I talked him into a face-to-face. I thought there was a slim chance that if we locked you in a bomb-proof room and asked politely, you'd have the good sense to spare yourself 'the rest'."

Marion has long since stopped listening. "You dullard," she says now she can finally speak, "I'm your chief of Antimemetics."

"We don't have an Antimemetics Division," Clay says.

"Yes, you do. *We* do."

O5-8 says, "We have a Memetics Division, a Telekontainment Division, Fire Services, Ops-A, Ops-B, Personnel, D-personnel and two dozen others. We don't have an Antimemetics Division."

"Do we have an Irony Division?" Marion asks. She hesitates hopefully. "No? Alright. Well, try this: why do you think the Antimemetics Division would show up in the listing?"

"This is just a cover story," Clay says to O5-8, not taking his eyes off Marion. "It's a good one, but she's had it worked out in advance."

"Clay, lose the piece," says the O5.

Grudgingly, Clay does so.

Marion relaxes fractionally. "There are SCPs with dangerous memetic properties," she says. "There are contagious concepts which require containment just like any physical threat. They get inside your head, and ride your mind to reach other minds. Right?"

"Right," O5-8 says. He could name a score of SCPs fitting this description without even thinking.

"There are SCPs with antimemetic properties," Marion goes on. "There are ideas which cannot be spread. There are entities and phenomena which harvest and consume information, particularly information about themselves. You take a Polaroid photo of one, it'll never develop. You write a description down with a pen on paper and hand it to someone— but what you've written turns out to be hieroglyphs, and nobody can understand them, not even you. You can look directly at one and it won't even be invisible, but you'll still perceive nothing there. Dreams you can't hold onto and secrets you can never share, and lies, and living conspiracies. It's a conceptual subculture, of ideas consuming other ideas and... sometimes... segments of reality. Sometimes, people.

"Which makes them a threat. That's all there is to it, really. Antimemes are dangerous, and we don't understand them; therefore, they are part of the Problem. Hence my division. We can do the sideways thinking that's needed to combat something which can literally eat your combat training."

O5-8 stares back at her for a long moment. Clay fidgets, disliking and distrusting the story, but the O5 seems more open to the concept.

"Name one," he says. "Name an antimemetic SCP."

"SCP-055," Marion says promptly.

"There is no SCP-055," Clay retorts.

"Again: Yes, there is," Marion says.

"There isn't," Clay asserts. "SCP numbers aren't assigned sequentially. There are gaps. That number hasn't been assigned. It's not superstition, we have enough to be concerned about without arbitrary numerological mysticism. We have SCP-666 and SCP-013. But there's no SCP-001. And there's no SCP-055."

"Clay," O5-8 says, "you should look at this." He turns his monitor so Clay can see the file that he has just retrieved. Clay bends over and reads it from top to bottom. Stunned, he scrolls back and reads it all a second time.

"But..."

"The file's dated from 2008," O5-8 says. "It's got all the right flags and signatures. It's keyed and coded. It's real."

"You've seen this before?" Clay asks him.

"Never in my life," O5-8 says. "As far as I can remember, anyway. On the other hand, if the content is accurate, both of us have probably seen it dozens of times."

Clay glares at Marion. "This isn't possible."

Marion nearly spits. "For Christ's sake, Clay, how long have you been working here?"

"But if this SCP is this powerful..." he begins.

"Yes?"

"Who wrote the file?" the O5 finishes. "And for that matter, how was the interview conducted, and who is 'Bartholomew Hughes'? And most importantly, how do you, Mrs. Wheeler, retain knowledge of any of this?"

"Bart Hughes wrote the file. He's dead," Marion says.

"What happened to him?"

"You don't want to know."

There is a very long pause while both O5-8 and his assistant react to this. In fact, they pass through a long, discrete sequence of reactions. Indignation at the seeming rudeness; confusion at Wheeler's incaution in front of sinister superiors; surprise at the magnitude of the claim; pure disbelief; comprehension; and finally, horror.

"What..." O5-8 asks carefully, "would happen if we *did* know?"

"It would happen to you as well," Marion says, levelly. "...As for the rest of your questions: we manage that pharmaceutically. You know we have class-A amnestics, for people who very badly need to forget things? Of course you do. Who could forget about class-A amnestics? Well, in Antimemetics, we have a different pill, for people who need to remember things that would otherwise be impossible to remember. Mnestics, class W, X, Y and Z. Same Greek root as the word 'mnemonic'. The M is silent."

In her bag, her phone beeps again.

With a nod of approval from the O5, Marion reaches into her bag and turns her phone off, acknowledging the prompt this time instead of postponing it. She pulls a blister pack from another pocket and pops a pill out. It's hexagonal, and green. She holds it up, and is satisfied to see a flicker of recognition on O5-8's face. He's beginning to put it back together.

Marion says, "These are class W mnestics, the weakest, suitable for continual use. Two pills per day. Go down to the site pharmacy and ask. The pharmacist will claim they don't stock any such thing; they're misremembering, tell them to double-check."

O5-8 sighs. "And now, I think, I get it. I see why we're having this conversation at all."

"Yes," Marion says, popping a second pill out and handing it over to him. "It's because you missed a dose. You're supposed to be on these, the same as me and everybody on my staff. It's the only way we can work. You forgot to take a pill, and then you forgot all the information that the pills were helping you retain. You forgot why you were taking them, who gave them to you, where to get more. You forgot about me, and my entire department. And now I have to bring you up to speed."

"And if I take this," O5-8 says, "I'll remember this whole conversation and we won't have to have it again?"

"Hopefully not," Marion says.

Clay pipes up. "Uh, should I be taking those?"

"Sorry, kiddo," O5-8 says. "Need to know. Maybe when you're an O5 yourself." He swallows the pill. Marion swallows hers too.

"So what is SCP-055?" O5-8 asks.

"SCP-055 is nothing," Marion says, now relaxing entirely. "SCP-055 is, as described in the file, a powerful information autosuppressor. As far as experimentation has uncovered, it can only be defined in negative terms. We can only record what it *isn't*. We know it isn't Safe or Euclid. We know it isn't round, or square, or green or silver. We know it isn't *stupid*. And we know it isn't *alone*. But what we do know is that it's weak. It's weak because it's the only antimemetic agent in our possession which has a physical entry in the files. We have paper records of the thing. We have containment procedures. It's not Safe, which means it's dangerous... but it's contained."

O5-8 blinks. "You have procedures? Where?"

Marion points at her head.

"Then how many other antimemes are there? How much more dangerous do they get?"

"Ten that I know of," Marion says. "Statistically, probably at least five more that I don't know of. This does not count the antimemetic entities freely roaming the halls, not under containment. There are at least two in this room with us right now. Don't look. I said don't look! It's pointless!"

O5-8 does an impressive job of controlling himself, keeping his attention focused on Marion. Clay doesn't fare so well, and quickly sweeps the whole room, even checking behind his back. Making an ass of himself, essentially. He finds nothing. He looks baffled.

"There is an invisible monster which follows me around and likes to eat my memories," Marion explains, patiently. "SCP-4987. Don't look it up, it's not there. I've learned to manage with it. It's like a demanding pet. I produce tasty memories on purpose so it doesn't eat something important, like my passwords or how to make coffee."

"And what's the other one?" Clay asks.

With another nod from O5-8, Marion goes to her bag again. This time she pulls out a gun and shoots Clay twice in the heart.

More aghast than in pain, Clay collapses sharply against the bookcase behind him. Pulling his head around to face Marion, he manages, "How did you— kn—"

Marion stands, aims more carefully and shoots him a third time, this time in the head.

O5-8, again, does an impressive job of not reacting. "That's Clay's gun," he deadpans. "You stole it from him."

"It's tricky to steal a firearm this heavy from someone without them noticing," Marion explains, unloading it and carefully setting it down. "But stealing a firearm and then stealing their memory of the theft is a little easier. Like I said: a pet. Some pets are dumb enough that they can be trained."

"Yes," O5-8 says, evenly. "That much I'd guessed. But why?"

"Because you were supposed to be taking class-W mnestics," Marion says. "You can't skip a dose of class-W mnestic. I've tried. You can postpone a dose, but you can't *forget* unless someone actively prevents you from taking it. There's only one person who could get close enough to you to do that, and that's your assistant. And remember when I asked him how long he'd been working here?"

"He didn't answer," O5-8 says. "I thought you were being rhetorical."

"He doesn't work here," Marion says. "He's an antimeme. Since when do you have an assistant? You don't *have* an assistant, Brent. Look at this office. It's got one desk. You've got a receptionist outside: *she's* the one who screens your calls and schedules your meetings. Where does Clay even sit? Where does he fit? Don't blame yourself. You're human, and these things are redaction incarnate. You need to think like a space alien to get around them."

O5-8 asks a question which, in any other workplace, would be absurd. "Is he dead?"

"Maybe," Marion says. "I can put his corpse in our research queue and we'll see what we can see when we open him up. There's a duality here, though. They're like parallel universes sharing the same space. It's conceptual versus concrete, figurative versus physical. It's very unusual for things to cross over. I don't know what Clay was, but he had a human body, which instantly makes him weird, even by our standards. As ever, the search for stalemate continues. I will let you know if we get any closer."

"Any side effects of these pills?" O5-8 asks.

"Nausea, and dramatically increased risk of pancreatic cancer," Marion says. "And very bad dreams."

Introductory Antimemetics

Junior Researcher Kim's been working for the Foundation for all of four hours and he feels pulverised, as if an anvil were dropped on his head in that first introductory lecture. It's lunchtime, and he's found a corner so far back in the cafeteria that nobody bothers him, where he can chew and swallow non-anomalous food, drink apocalyptically strong coffee and digest the hard lessons of the morning.

On his Foundation-provided phone, he pages fretfully through the few SCP files for which he has clearance. Most of them have to be jokes. That's how they read. Like very bad, dark, frightening jokes.

Kim's one of eleven Junior Researchers in the new intake, and the other ten are sitting in a separate group at a separate table, chatting animatedly to one another. There are some instructors here and there, munching sandwiches. Other than them, the cafeteria - large enough to seat two hundred people or more - is deserted. To Kim, that seems odd. Site 41 is large, three skulking buildings with significant basement space, buried casually in the forests of central Colorado. Where is everybody?

A man in a grey suit walks into the cafeteria, makes eye contact with Kim and strides purposefully over. The man's suit is sharp enough to cut. He wears a tie pin and a platinum wristwatch as big as a brick. He looks badly misplaced. Site 41 is a working site. There's training, education, research, development, analysis, and even the containment of a very few Safe SCPs going on here. Executives shouldn't ever be here. So what is he? A lost exec, trying to find the helipad? Or a researcher or instructor, dressing for the job he wants, not the job he has?

"Hell of a first day," the man says, holding a hand out. "Alastair Grey. With an E."

"Kim," says Kim. "Paul Kim."

"Good to meet you. What accent is that, if you don't mind me asking?"

Kim blinks. "New York," he says. "I'm from New York. Are you the site director?"

"You seem on edge."

"Well, that figures, doesn't it?" Kim asks. "You must know how that intro goes. It's like an atom bomb to the ego. I just had almost everything I know overturned. It turns out I've spent my entire adult life being 'protected' from 'dangerous' knowledge, as if the whole outside world is a... a ballpit, for under-sevens. Stepping out of that has been... humiliating. To start with. And..." He blinks again. "Hey, what do you do here, exactly? You didn't answer my question."

"You didn't answer mine," Grey says.

"Of course I did," Kim says. "I'm from—"

And then he just stops, his train of thought running off the end of the track into air. It's on the tip of his tongue, the answer to Grey's question, but he can't get the words out. "That's weird," he says, shaking his head.

At this point, he also notices that Grey isn't wearing his badge. This could be an honest mistake, albeit an extremely serious one. But surely execs don't get to the executive level without being scrupulously correct in everything they do?

"Who are you?" Kim asks again.

"Your life story was fascinating."

"What?"

"You spoke four languages," Grey tells him. "One now, and soon zero. Too huge an intellect to specialise, your education was a fusion of biochemistry and comparative literature. You felt as if you'd die if you couldn't find more foreign thoughts to cram into your head. You've been all over the world, hungry, and every country you've ever been to was like landing on another planet. You toy with anthropology, but there's too much world for one human race to ever understand, let alone one human. There's too much human race. We should pare it down."

Kim nods. "Would you excuse me for just one second?" He gets up and hurries to another table, to the instructor whom he met earlier that day. When Kim gets close to her he feels a kind of staticky sensation building up. He tries to shake her shoulder, and succeeds in moving it a little, but it's like reaching through tar. "Hey! There's a problem. There's an intruder. I think it might be an SCP. Doc, look at me!

Hello?" She doesn't react. He tries the gaggle of fellow newcomers as well, but they keep chattering and hypothesising, oblivious to him shouting and clapping in their ears. "Hey! People! Listen to me! No, no, no, no."

He looks back. Grey has stood up and started moving towards him, still with that confident smile. And there's definitely something wrong with him now because he's visible through the tables, like an augmented reality holoprojection jammed inside Kim's eyeball.

Kim realises with a stab of fear that he can even see Grey when he blinks. His eyelids close, but Grey is still there, an apparition in what for all of Kim's life has been totally personal, private darkness. The only way he can avoid seeing Grey is to turn away, and even then he feels a radioactive prickling in the back of his eyeballs.

Kim tries to phone one of the newbies. The phone in the newbie's pocket rings, and other than that, nothing happens. Nobody reacts.

"That doesn't make sense," Kim says.

"Do you remember your father?" Grey says.

"I never knew my father," Kim says, edging away. "Mom raised me."

Grey's white smile is a fixture. "These people loved your perspective. They were going to put you to work on anomalous antimemes. But they don't remember you exist. You don't exist."

Kim says, mainly to himself, "There aren't any dangerous SCPs on this site. It's a Safe site. So either you're not dangerous, or nobody knows you exist. And if nobody knows you exist, then that means you're either brand new, or... you're... What's an antimeme?"

"Hell of a first day," Grey says.

"Are you sentient?" Kim asks.

"You seem on edge," Grey says.

Kim bolts. He exits the cafeteria, turns a corner and runs ten or eleven paces down the corridor, to where there's an elevator. He stabs the "down" button and waits. The elevator door is highly polished, reflective. Kim catches sight of a face in the mirrored surface and nearly falls over with shock, because it's a face he has never seen before, and it's apparently his own. "Jesus! Oh, no no no," he babbles.

"What the hell, what the *hell*—"

Grey comes around the corner, still only strolling, just as the elevator cracks open. Kim dives in and punches the lowest floor, basement level 8. It's instinctive, although he could rationalise the decision in retrospect. (He can't just get in his car and drive. It's better if Grey stays on site than if he's set loose in rational "reality". And to do that it's better if Kim retreats to the lowest, darkest corner of the site for which he has access. And then waits for Grey, and then locks all the doors behind them. And waits to die...) The elevator starts descending, and the apparation of Grey - visible through doors and floors - disappears upwards, shrinking with distance and perspective, but still smiling broadly down at Kim.

Kim paces in the elevator. *I don't remember what my face looks like. It said it had eaten all my secondary languages, but I don't remember learning anything other than English. So— It's eating my memories. It's consuming information. And I can't contact anybody directly, which means I'm on my own.*

I'm not trained for this.

He hammers his head once against the elevator wall, and stares at his shoes. *But I don't know that. What if I've been trained, but I don't remember my training anymore? What if I've been working here for years and I only think this is my first day? What if I've met this thing before? What if everybody on the site has met it multiple times... and... nobody remembers? Is this what an antimeme is?*

Kim remembers the near-empty cafeteria. And miles of totally unoccupied corridors and vacant office and lab space. *Maybe it's not just eating my memories. Maybe it eats people whole, removes them completely from history. Maybe it's been haunting the site for years and that's why the site's so empty, because it's nearly finished exterminating us all?*

I need to get help. I need to warn somebody. How? I can't talk to people, I can't phone them. I should— I should write an SCP.

But surely someone's already thought of that.

He pulls his phone out. He pulls out the listing. Nearly ten thousand SCP entries. A hundred of them are tagged "antimemetics" alone.

Kim clears his mind. *Grey with an E. G-R-E-Y. 4-7-3-9.*

> **SCP-4739**
>
> **Object class**: Keter
>
> **Special Containment Procedures**: I'm disregarding the format, because time is a factor. If you're reading this, you've already been isolated from the Foundation at large. Attempts to signal for help are futile. You are now inside 4739's gullet, after ingestion and prior to digestion. You need to get to lab S041-B08-053 as soon as possible and continue the research until you find a way to stop or kill Grey, before it kills you. Don't read the rest until you're in the elevator.
>
> **Description**:

At that moment the elevator doors open at basement level 8. Alastair Grey is waiting, still smiling disarmingly. He steps forward.

Desperate, Kim hurls his phone overarm at the creature's forehead. It's a solid chunk of metal and it's a dead hit. Grey reels backwards and cracks his skull against the wall. By the time he recovers, Kim is out of sight, haring away down the left corridor, just echoing, fading footsteps on concrete.

Two forty-five degree turns, and room 53 is in sight, the door at the farthest end. It looks like a submarine bulkhead. Kim spots the keypad from way out. Four digits. He tries 4739, and it works first time. The bulkhead mechanism takes agonising seconds to open up.

"Come on, come on, come on!"

"Do you remember your mother?" he hears Grey calling down the corridor.

"I never knew my parents, I was an orphan," Kim hisses under his breath. For a split second he wonders what Grey might really mean by that, but he doesn't have time to dwell on it.

The bulkhead opens. Kim slides in and pulls it closed behind him, locking the mechanism up again, as if that'll buy him even one second. The lab inside is sizeable, windowless of course, and stacked to the ceiling with a jumble of equipment which Kim hardly recognises. There are pieces of thick shattered glass underfoot. In the corner there's a computer terminal, locked. Kim unlocks it, and there's the same entry waiting for him:

Description: SCP-4739 is a powerful, slow-acting antimemetic kill agent taking the appearance of a male Caucasian business executive calling itself "Alastair Grey". SCP-4739 is attracted to dense clusters of organically-stored information - essentially, extremely knowledgeable, complicated, interesting people. SCP-4739 isolates its victim from the outside world by enveloping them in an antimemetic field which makes it impossible for the victim, or anything done by the victim, to be perceived or remembered. SCP-4739 then consumes the victim's memories and knowledge until they become vegetative and die. This process takes between 15 minutes and 2 hours and is described as being "like Alzheimer's disease in fast-forward".

SCP-4739 is not believed to be sentient, although it imitates the behaviour of a sentient being to the extent that it can appear sentient to the inattentive. Its victims are able to move and act freely, since it is impossible to escape once caught, or to signal for help. Communications such as written notes, graffiti and electronic mail do get sent, and persist in reality, but SCP-4739's effect spreads with each message, making it impossible for an external observer to perceive the message until such time as SCP-4739 catches them too.

The SCP entry which you are currently reading is created and maintained by victims of SCP-4739, because it is only visible to victims of SCP-4739. If you are reading this SCP entry, SCP-4739 has caught you. You are now isolated from the Foundation at large and constitute an effective Foundation of one. You have between 15 minutes and 2 hours to reach Site 41, basement level 8, laboratory 053, familiarise yourself with the existing research, and continue this research until you find a way to contain or decommission SCP-4739, or, more likely, die. If your field of expertise is not related to antimemetic containment, we sincerely apologise, and advise you to start learning. Fast.

SCP-4739 has consumed ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| |||| Foundation researchers since we started counting on August 3, 2013. (If you are reading this entry for the first time, please add a mark.) We estimate at least 50% of victims never make it as far as this database entry, so the true victim count is more than twice this figure.

"But how do I kill it?" Kim screams. He scrolls and scrolls through the

research, which is chaotic and haphazardly arranged, because nobody has found the spare seconds to sort it out. There are dozens of separate lines of research, contributed in patchwork by a succession of victims, all ending with variations on the same final line: "I'm going to try X. If you're reading this, X didn't work and I'm dead, which means approach X is a dead end, and you have to think of something else."

He reads. Nobody has succeeded in physically engaging with Grey. Nobody can stall it, evade it, slow it down, reason with it or redirect it to some other target. People have tried poisoning their memories with indigestible ideas, drip-feeding their memories to Grey to slow him down, replacing their memories faster than Grey can eat them, and force-feeding Grey too many memories at once to overfeed him and blow him up. They've tried committing suicide by Class-A amnestic overdose. None of it worked. More than a hundred people, most of them apparently possessing doctorates, have slid into the maw of this thing, fought briefly and, with a greater or lesser degree of dignity, died.

There are no remaining untried threads.

"I'm fucked!" Kim concludes. He glances up. Grey's not in the room yet, but Kim can see him strolling down the last stretch of corridor. He's a totally intangible being, physical obstructions are irrelevant to him. He can't be hurt.

Kim clutches the pocket where he used to keep his phone.

Wait a second.

He scrolls again. He finds the three or four sad, desperate wretches who died confronting Grey physically. Combat knife and Glock. Baseball bat (Kim looks up and checks the room; sure enough, the bat's there, rolled under a table). One man, an elderly botanist far out of his depth, said he was just going to try whatever he could find that was heaviest. That explains the shattered CRT television, and the light layer of thick glass on the floor near the bulkhead. There's even CCTV footage of the botanist's attempt. He accomplishes literally nothing. Grey is a holographic ghost, and the CRT drops right through him, imploding when it hits the floor at Grey's feet. The botanist spends the rest of the video's running time huddled in a corner, gradually losing his mind while Grey watches placidly.

The difference being, Kim realises with his eyes boggling, *a phone is a solid brick full of information. And before me, nobody tried using*

information as a missile.

Kim searches for the experiments - several of them, scattered - where the victim tried to divert Grey to a different data source. The general idea seemed to be to overload Grey by pointing him at something containing too much information: the internet, or the terabit feed from a live particle accelerator experiment, or a stack of hard drives containing the first few quadrillion binary digits of pi. But nobody could figure out a way to distract Grey's attention; prominently-placed screens full of data, he would ignore; data beamed at him electromagnetically (radio, laser) had no effect. And nobody could figure out a way to tunnel the information in through the victim's mind as extra memories. It was written off as impossible, closed as a line of investigation.

The hard drives, Kim finds, are right there on the workbench next to the computer. It's a half-rack unit, a cuboidal block of metalwork as big and heavy as a bowling ball. One of the most ineffective conceivable melee weapons.

Kim snatches up the three longest pieces of ethernet cable he can find, and starts plaiting them into a chain.

Then he remembers who he is, and where he is, and what his responsibilities are. He goes to the computer, to the SCP entry, adds himself to the victim tally and writes up exactly what it is he's about to try. Because he might not be the last one, and the world needs to know that this didn't work.

*

Grey comes through the lab bulkhead to find most of the equipment in the room toppled onto the floor, to create room for the black and silver drive array that Paul Kim is whirling around his head, on a two-metre chain made of plaited network cable. It makes a low thrumming sound as it whirls. Grey is not intelligent enough to stop moving forwards, and catches the array directly in the side of his head, rack mount point first, like a morningstar.

Grey absorbs a few trillion digits of the impact, but it isn't enough. There's a green snap of light and a noise like a subway train short-circuiting, and Grey's a pile in the corner, his head caved in and the

drive array partially demolished in pieces around him.

Kim decides that history can fill in whatever quip it likes best.

*

"It was chewing its way up the Antimemetics Division hierarchy," Wheeler tells him in the aftermath. "It was only a matter of time until it bit down on somebody dangerous. Congratulations on demonstrating a basic level of competence when it counted. Dozens of others couldn't."

Kim still feels rattled. But the shock is dissipating, faster than he'd expected.

Marion Wheeler, it turns out, is the Antimemetics Division chief. She is Kim's new boss.

"I want to say it was dumb luck," Kim says. "I want to say that I just threw my phone, it was instinct, it was muscle memory. It was my first day, and I got lucky as hell. ...I want to say those things, but I'm sitting here, and turning those statements over, and none of them would be true, would they?"

Wheeler waits expectantly, and says nothing.

"You're not my *new* boss," Kim says. "You're just my boss. This isn't my first day at all. I've been working here for... well, it must be over a decade, right? I think I've been a professional antimemetics researcher since at least the mid-2000s. It's just that the first thing Grey ate was my memories of everything past the first day. And even then..."

"I see very little luck in what happened today," Wheeler says. "Instinct and muscle memory are just deep forms of training. Like I said, a basic level of competence. An ability to piece your own life and all of your past knowledge back together, faster than nearly anybody else. This is what we try to drill into you. And sometimes, thankfully, it takes."

"This isn't even the first time we've had this conversation," Kim continues. "There've been other incidents. With other SCPs with amnestic powers. You've sat there and watched me put myself back together before."

"And it hasn't gotten old yet," Wheeler admits, with something which might be approaching a smirk.

"How long does it usually take for me to recover?"

"A few months," Wheeler says. "But if you want the honest truth, people in this division are as competent on day one as they'll ever be. You come to the job firing on all cylinders, or not at all. The rest is just fine-tuning and chemistry."

"So what you're actually saying is you don't care about my mental state and you need me back at work now," Kim says.

Wheeler nods. "I need an updated SCP entry, just to begin with. I need you to nail down the model for Grey's predatory pattern and exactly how you defeated it. I want you to work out what it did with the bodies - incinerated, disintegrated, or just left them lying around the site in rotting perceptually cloaked heaps. And I need countermeasures for when it comes back."

"It's not dead? Wait," Kim says. "I think I know this one. It's coming back to me. 'Ideas don't die.'"

Unforgettable, That's What You Are

"El, it's finished."

Lyn Marness is more than ninety years old and hasn't stood at his full height in ten. He was a tower of a man in his prime, two metres tall and built like a boxer. Nearly nobody he ever met was able to look him straight in the eye, at least not and tell him "No". Illness has gradually eaten away at that over the years. He feels as if he lives at the bottom of a deep bath, everybody he ever meets looking down at him from slippery, unscalable walls, none of them able to reach down to help him. He's spent his final months crumpled up in bed like a dying spider, changing to a corpse's colour ahead of time. It might have been bearable if he'd lost his mind, but he remembers what he used to be: a leader, a powerhouse. He used to be able to alter the course of terrible events for the better, to get justice. He used to protect people.

"El. You can wake up now."

But there's a warm wind through his thin colourless hair and there's direct sunlight coming down on him now, and the heat is filling him up like a tonic. He's outside; it's been too long since he was last outside. When he opens his eyes he sees his lake, the one in the Northwest which he used to have all to himself every summer. He's on a boat, his boat, lying on a blanket laid on the deck. A few kilometres away behind them is the little lake house, empty.

It's perfect. He didn't know he had the strength left to safely leave the hospital, let alone travel this far. But if he'd put his mind to it and selected a final moment, this might have been it.

"Do you remember me?"

Marness looks, with eyes which are strengthening. The woman speaking is seated on the deck beside him, attentive. She has a large plastic box full of medical supplies open in front of her, and a light suit jacket laid on the deck beside it, and she has her sleeves rolled up so she can work. As he watches, she carefully disposes of a needle.

A dim memory surfaces and starts taking shape. The woman is twice as old now as when he knew her last, and visibly twice as confident. It

would be difficult to forget her. He taught her everything he— well, everything he could remember at the time. He remembers her as a field agent. He remembers sending her through Hell, a fistful of times. "Marion."

"El," the woman softly explains, "you died. You died surrounded by grieving family. They loved you very much, and they cried over you. The funeral for the fake is in a few days, but unfortunately you won't be able to see it yourself. You're dead now, and this is what comes next."

"Marion. Hutchinson." Marness feels gold spreading through his bones, miracle juice.

It's Wheeler now, but she doesn't correct him. "When you retired from the Foundation, El, we did what we do to all of us who retire; what all of us agree to when we sign up. We gave you some medicine which made you forget. As you stepped out of the door for the last time, all the work you did for us — great work, which saved lives — evaporated away, and your cover story sealed over those years and became reality. That's why you've spent your whole retirement believing that you were a former section chief at the FBI. It's what you wanted, it's what we wanted, it's what you agreed to.

"But you, alone, agreed to something else as well. And you must be starting to remember, now, what that something else was. I've injected you with a serum which throws the human aging process into hard reverse, and it affects everything: organs, tissues, memories. You'll be coming up on it soon. Remember?"

"Yes," Marness croaks, remembering, dizzy.

"You signed over your final twelve hours to us. You asked for a full and happy and well-deserved retirement... but now, for the last day, you work for us again, because of one particular job. I have it in writing here, you see? Do you recognise your signature, and mine? I witnessed."

"Yes."

"Do you remember who you are?"

"Doctor Lyn Patrick Marness, of the Foundation," he says. "Antimemetics Division founder."

Wheeler smiles with relief. It's good to see him again.

"We need some memories from you," she explains. "Memories which nobody else in the world has access to, and which are buried so deeply that we can't extract them without killing you. So this afternoon, that's what we're going to do. We're going to extract those memories, and once we're done, you'll be dead."

Marness has already begun to regress to the time when he himself set this wheel in motion. He remembers, very clearly, discovering the mystery in his own head, the blank spots which he couldn't explain, and couldn't safely access with any kind of chemical or physical technique. He remembers deferring the mystery until now.

"What happened in 1976?" Wheeler asks.

*

Marness sits up. His skin is beginning to clear and his breathing is improving.

He feels as if his brain is cleaved in two by a wormhole, such that his eyes are focusing on different time periods. In his right eye he sees the lake and the boat he's dying on; in his left he sees a collage of electrifyingly familiar past faces and places. Bart Hughes with his grin and thick glasses and baby face, looking like some kid dressed up as a Foundation researcher; the original Site 48 crew, great techs but a hopeless excuse for a softball team; young Marion with steel-strong nerves and a mind like a laser; suits and lab coats and MTF operatives. And everywhere paperwork, and floods of serial numbers.

He starts to speak.

1976 was the year he founded the division. He brainstormed the whole thing in one legendary week, hammering out the science and then distilling the first chemical mnestic with the help of a hand-picked trio of assistants, the first Antimemetics researchers. No antimemetic SCPs had even been observed up to that point — the entire operation was a shot in the dark — and yet the team immediately struck gold. Passive black holes of information, active predatory infovores, unrememberable worms which covered the human skin like dust mites... contagious bad news, self-sealing secrets, living murders, Chinatowns.

Wheeler wonders if there might be something more serious awry with Marness' head. His version of events is hopelessly romantic. In Wheeler's experience, nobody looks back on Foundation work fondly.

"But it was all too fast," Marness says. "Special containment procedures take time to develop, much more time than I took. The Foundation as a whole acquires about a dozen new SCPs annually. I found that many in one year, essentially single-handedly. It was too *easy*. It was as if I knew it all already, and was just catching up.

"And then... one day I realised I couldn't remember my life before Antimemetics. I knew I'd been a Foundation operative for decades prior, that was where I got the authority to start my own division, but there was nothing else there. It was a wall in my mind, which even mnestics couldn't get me past. I went to the paper archives and looked at my own personnel file, and..."

Marness trails off. Not because he's forgotten what to say next, it's deliberate. The trailing off is exactly what happened.

"You woke up back at your desk half a working day later, remembering nothing," Wheeler says. "You went through the loop a dozen times before someone realised what was happening and broke you out of it."

Wheeler knows all of this. The file still exists, and the antimemetic effect still clouds the back half of it. All of this would be over in a second if any of that back half could be read.

Marness goes on. "When I assembled the evidence what I found was... well, a hole. Like a jigsaw with only the edges and corners. So I did the only thing I could do, I looked at the shape of the hole. And, together with Bart Hughes and others, I formed a theory.

"This is not the first Antimemetics Division. Before 1976, there was another one. I was part of that division; possibly, I led it. Certainly, I am the only known survivor of it. *Something* happened to that team. Some antimemetic force chewed up and swallowed the *idea* of the Antimemetics Division itself. I was let off lightly; I lived. The rest of those people, whoever they were, however many of them there were, are missing without trace."

Wheeler nods. "This much we know already. I was there when you wrote the note, remember? The question is known. It's the answer that we can't get to without killing you. It's the answer that we've waited all these years to get at. I'm here to ask you: *What. Happened?*"

Marness covers his right eye and grimaces, trying. He fails. "It's not there. You haven't sent me back far enough, there's still that wall there in my head. I remember why the question exists, but I don't remember the answer. I need more."

Wheeler swabs his arm, and gives him another ten years.

*

Excerpt from Document 180047109-L4799-098, *User's Guide To Chemical Mnestics*:

> The Class-X mnestic drug is a failed eternal youth serum. X rejuvenates both mind and body by up to □□□ years, but its effects are temporary, wearing off in a matter of hours. Furthermore, as the drug wears off, the suppressed time reasserts itself all at once, causing a harmful "whiplash" effect on the subject's physiology. X can rejuvenate an individual safely by up to thirty days, but with stronger doses the whiplash effect becomes dangerous, and past a threshold of 16-18 months it is fatal in all known subjects.
>
> X's restorative effect on the human memory is essentially a side-effect of all of this. However, this side-effect is so useful that it has become the drug's main practical purpose. The Antimemetics Division uses small doses of X to temporarily sharpen or restore memories from the recent past. This aids Foundation operatives in the accurate recall of incidents involving memory-corrupting entities.

*

Marness seems like another man once the second X dose takes effect. Wrinkles are sliding back up into his face, muscle mass is returning to his limbs, but it takes Wheeler a second to realise the real reason why; she's just booted him back across the field/desk agent transition. Marness has regressed a little way past senior management, the realm where most problems were solved by saying the correct words, and

into a time where he survived through physical fitness, situational alertness and hands-on experience.

Marness gets to his feet for the first time in years. He scans his surroundings, examining the placid golden lake and the sky and the boat itself. He doesn't sit down again. He smooths down his hospital gown, wishing he had a sweater and, separately, some fishing gear. He brushes a hand through new, old hair. His sideburns are back.

"We weren't Foundation at first," he says. "The first Antimemetics Division was a U.S. Army project. It ran parallel with Manhattan during World War II. We called ourselves the Unthinkables.

"It began as an experiment in advanced propaganda. The objective was to cut through the physical conflict and find a way to rupture the ideological machine, to obliterate the *idea* of Nazism. After two years, enough theory had been developed that the task had been reduced to an engineering problem. Another two years, and the engineering problem had been reduced as well, and what we had built was a very special kind of bomb.

"Unfortunately, we didn't understand what we'd built. Back then, we didn't have the mnestics or the shielding that we could use to protect ourselves. We didn't understand how far ahead you need to think when you're working with this kind of technology.

"We got looped. It was textbook. We built the unthinkable bomb and test-detonated it... and it worked perfectly. The bomb destroyed itself, and erased its own successful detonation, and flattened all the knowledge which had gone together to build it. We forgot that we had ever built the bomb at all, and started over.

"To our credit, we realised pretty quickly what must have happened. There was a four-year gap in our progress now, and there was no other way to explain it. But by the time we put the pieces together the second time, the war was almost over. The Nazis had been defeated by conventional means, and the Japanese had been broken by the first atomic bombings. So we completed the second antimemetic bomb, and after that, we sat on it."

Marion Wheeler is silent for a long moment.

"The U.S. Army," she says doubtfully, "was secretly developing antimemetic weaponry as early as the 1940s."

"We sure were," Marness says, with more than a hint of pride.

"Of course, there is no one in the whole world who could back this up."

"That's right," Marness says, flashing a smile he hasn't flashed in decades. "You only have my word for it. Cute, huh? Still, this is why you resurrected me, isn't it? For the sake of one more good war story. God, I've missed shop talk."

"I resurrected you because I want a very specific question answered," Wheeler says. "Although I can see that in a way you've already answered it. This bomb was the means, wasn't it? The old Antimemetics Division—"

"—the Unthinkables—"

"—bombed themselves. Somehow."

"That's right," Marness says.

"From context," Wheeler goes on, "I assume that they knew what they were doing that time. I assume it was not an accident."

"It was not," Marness says.

*

The displaced half of Marness' brain is anchored in the Seventies now, so the True History of the New Original Unthinkables is an open book to him. And he reads:

"After the war the second bomb collected dust for years. We began sketching improved designs for a third bomb, but around that time oversight was starting to flicker out. We completed our research and production objectives, and were given no further objectives. Funding became shaky and we couldn't figure out why. It wasn't entirely clear that the project overseers knew what we were doing. Or even that they remembered we existed. It was a side-effect from the research, of course, one we had no way of managing at the time.

"In 1951, a cult movement began in Ojai, California. It was... wrong, everything about it was just wrong. In a matter of days it was a national phenomenon and still growing. It was all over the news. To spread that far in months would have been credible, but days was

simply impossible. We, in the team, could see that the philosophy behind the cult was unnaturally contagious. It was the opposite of unthinkable, it was unforgettable. We knew that this was what our bomb was designed for. We prompted the overseers for direction. But there were no orders.

"At the time that the outbreak began, we were a U.S. Army laboratory, through and through. Eight days into the crisis the Foundation 'acquired' us. All the classified research, all the material resources, and all the compliant top staff, including me. Anybody who wouldn't comply was mind-wiped and sent back to the Army. Twenty hours after the acquisition, we deployed the second bomb and the cult was gone. Nobody remembered it, nobody remembered being part of it, zero loss of life. A completely clean detonation.

"After that is when everything really kicked off. Once we started working for the Foundation, the pace of research ramped up. Every new technological advancement uncovered new hidden SCPs. I passed the Foundation field exams and went out catching ghosts. My life turned into the Twilight Zone. I—"

Marness blinks hard. He covers one of his eyes, then the other.

"I remember all these different people now," he says. "It feels like my memory is in stereo. Almost every antimemetic SCP we caught before the wipe in '76, we caught again soon after the wipe. That means I remember two acquisition logs for each one. I remember two Antimemetics teams and I don't remember who belongs on which side of the wall. Do you remember Goldie Yarrow? The neurologist? Studied the mechanism of anomalously accelerated memory loss... wrote a library on the subject..."

Wheeler doesn't.

"Dr. Ojobiru? Julie Still?"

"El, this is important. Are you at the right place in your own timeline to remember what happened yet?"

Marness focuses. And he discovers that he is. Something changes in his eyes, as he stops reminiscing. He speaks more slowly now, his voice dropping almost to a whisper:

"There is an SCP which your division has never seen. The SCP which my division couldn't contain. The escapee. This is what you wanted, isn't it, Marion?"

"Yes," she says. "This is the data I'm killing you for." She leaves a gap where, if she felt there was anything to apologise for, she would apologise.

Marness locks eyes with her. "It was eating my division alive. It came at us so hard and so fast that the only way we could stop it was to self-destruct. But we had no site nuke, and in retrospect it is obvious to me, now, that this was because the SCP had consumed our site nuke first of all.

"If you know it exists, it knows you exist. The more you know about it, the more it knows about you. If you can see it, it can see you. And you *can* see it. You've been looking right at it all afternoon."

Wheeler is suddenly acutely aware of her surroundings.

There are only two of them on the boat. The boat is anchored more than a kilometre from any of the lake shores. She hasn't brought any backup with her. There's a radioactive prickling in her brain. She doesn't—

Red flag. Why didn't I bring any backup with me? That doesn't make sense.

There should be a team at the lake house. There should be an MTF operative and a medic here on the boat with me. And a second boat. At minimum. Am I all alone out here? Why did I do that?

She pulls her gun, but doesn't aim it at Marness yet. "Where is it? Is it in you?"

Marness' voice is becoming urgent. He covers both of his eyes again. "Destroying all knowledge of it was the only way to destroy it. And restoring my memories was a foolproof way to bring it back!"

It's in his eyes. Most likely his left eye. Wheeler backs up to the other side of the boat, draws a bead on the centre of Marness' head, and says, "El. Are you still in there?"

"There is a way to fix this," Marness hisses, dropping to his knees. He keeps his eyes screwed up and gropes his way forward blindly, on his hands and knees.

"El, you need to tell me what this thing is."

"That's the opposite of what we need to do," Marness says. "You need to set another bomb off."

"We don't have that bomb. We lost that technology—" Wheeler begins.

"You've always had it! There's an engineering lab in Site 41. You know it. An underground complex the size of a football field. In pristine condition, and totally disused. Why? Think about it. That's where your bomb's installed."

"But that just sets us back to square one. If I set the bomb off," Wheeler says, knowing full well that she is thousands of kilometres from it and can't hope to reach it in time anyway, "how do we contain this thing?"

"We won't," Marness shouts. "We can't, ever! Don't you get it? The whole division is looped! We start the division, we run headlong into this thing, and either it eats us, or we wipe ourselves out in self-preservation. The idea of antimemes is as old as forgetfulness itself. Humans have been looping through this problem over and over again since long before the Forties. Maybe for centuries!"

His blindly probing fingers find the medical box. It's too late.

As Wheeler watches, a waving black pedipalp coated in dark hairs forces its way out through Marness' left eye. Marness screams. Still on his knees, he grasps the pedipalp with both hands and tries to break it, but it's solid, as if it has bones inside it.

"What is it?" Wheeler shouts at him. "That can't be the whole story. Where is it from, what does it want? Can it reason, can it speak?"

"Help—"

A second spider leg, significantly longer and spindlier, slides out through Marness' trachea, ruining his throat and voice box and producing a gout of blood. He gurgles. A third leg shoots from his abdomen, like a spear.

Wheeler shoots Marness in the head. Marness falls forward, limp, then rises back up, lifted by the three spider appendages as if he is a puppet being controlled by something gigantic and invisible. His arms raise, as if suspended by wires.

Wheeler squints. She fires four more shots over Marness' head, at the likely body mass of the invisible puppeteer, and fires the rest of her clip almost directly into the sky. The whole boat vibrates, along with the surface of the lake, as if responding to infrasound or a localised earthquake. Then the boat shudders violently and starts to lift out of

the water, raised by more unseen appendages.

Wheeler holsters her gun and goes for the medical box herself, pulling it away from Marness' floating feet. There's a compartment with Class-B amnestic, the fast-acting stuff, in serum form. She does a hurried burst of mental arithmetic, measures out the correct dosage in a syringe and, hands shaking, plunges it into a wrist vein. The boat is still rising. Whatever the monster is, it's colossally tall, or maybe it flies.

She is, of course, already dosed up to the eyeballs with mnestic drugs. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to perceive any of this. Foundation medical literature warns in the strongest possible terms against putting both kinds of drug into the same brain. Best case scenario, this ends with her in the hospital.

They're thirty metres up in the air now, ten storeys. There's a stabbing pain developing in her left eye. She kicks her shoes off and throws the gun away. She goes to the edge and contemplates the drop for a disbelieving second. She jumps.

It takes two heart-stopping seconds of freefall for her to hit the water. The chilled hammerblow of the impact is enough to blank her mind out. By the time she surfaces she doesn't remember where she fell from, or why. And likewise, the skyscraper-sized being which claimed Marness and the boat has forgotten about her.

"What the hell," she gasps, treading water. "What the hell, where the hell?"

There is nothing above her, no explanation. Only the symptoms of the drug cocktail give her any indication of what just happened: a sensation like hundreds of tiny lumps of hot solder in her brain, and pain and exhaustion spreading to all of her tendons. She wants to die.

Swim, says part of her. *Get to shore first. Then you can die.*

*

The extraction team finds her around dusk, unconscious on the lake shore. They stabilise her in the helicopter, then take her to Site 41 for examination, and to have her system flushed.

She spends a solid eight days at home, detoxifying: no mnestics, no amnestics, no exposure to dangerous memory-corrupting SCPs, no work visitors. "No work," the doctor also tells her, pointlessly.

It isn't anywhere near the first missing event in Wheeler's life, nor is she the first person in the Antimemetics staff to have such an experience, but the sensation is no less disturbing for its familiarity. As per procedure, she writes a report summarising everything she can remember. The gap in her memory is about thirteen hours.

Then she adds her report to the extensive, complex map of Missing Time which the whole division maintains collectively. It is a map of holes, and the map is becoming large enough that very faint patterns are gradually forming. The outline of an enemy is becoming visible, or perhaps a group of enemies.

When she quizzes the extraction team later, none of them remember who activated the emergency beacon which summoned them. In fact, the beacon itself cut out long before they landed at the lake. Wheeler compares the current size of her division with her best estimate of what it should be. Maybe she needs a few more key people here and there... So, assuming the division was fully staffed before the event, maybe those empty roles are the people who died this time around. Maybe one of them activated the beacon. A commendable act, by someone now only known to exist because of that single act.

It's weeks later still that Wheeler discovers the largest new hole in her memory:

Who founded the division? When?

CASE COLOURLESS GREEN

> **Item #:** SCP-3125
>
> **Object Class**: Keter
>
> **Special Containment Procedures**: SCP-3125 is kept inside Cognitohazard Containment Unit 3125 on the first floor of Site 41. This containment unit is a 10m by 15m by 3m cuboidal room clad in layers of lead, soundproofing and telepathic shielding. Access is through an airlock system at one end of the containment unit. This airlock is programmed to allow only one person to enter the containment unit at a time, and to remain locked until this person exits before allowing another person to enter.
>
> Under no circumstances may any coherent information be allowed to leave the containment unit. This includes written and electronic notes, photographs, audio and video recordings, sound, electromagnetic and particle-based signals and psi emanations. During the exit cycle, a purge system rigged to the airlock flushes the occupant's memory by flooding the airlock with amnestic gas for three minutes.
>
> A senior Antimemetics Division staff member must visit SCP-3125 every six weeks (42 days).
>
> **END OF FILE**

"You're kidding me. That's the whole entry?"

"That's the whole entry," Wheeler says.

It isn't even the fiftieth strangest thing Paul Kim has seen in the database, but still: "No description, no acquisition report, no test log, no addenda? No clue who built the unit, or when, or how many times it's been visited, or who carried out the previous visits, or what they took in with them, or how long they were in there?"

"Well, obviously Bart Hughes built the unit," Wheeler says, and this cannot be denied. The man's signature style of containment architecture is recognisable a mile out. Sleek, white, plainly

impregnable without the aid of extremely heavy tools. "Which makes it at least seven years old. That's sixty visits or more. I guess there are good reasons for the rest of those omissions. Anyway... the timer watchdog says it's time again."

"I don't like the idea of you routinely exposing yourself to a cognitohazard so dangerous that we can't even write the reason why we can't write it down down," Kim says. "Especially because it's impossible for us to recover any usable information this way. You're going to go in, be incommunicado for two hours and come out a smiling amnesiac. What do we gain from that? It's just a breach risk."

Wheeler hears every word of this and elects to ignore it all. There's a vague shape of familiarity about the entry as written; there are a few word choices which reassure her, in an intangible way, that it was written by someone who knew what they were doing. Possibly her.

Kim's still talking. "We should just scrub that last line from the database entry. There can't be *anything* good in that room."

Wheeler puts her keycard in the slot. The airlock rewards her with green LEDs and begins to cycle open. It's built as a slender vertical cylinder with a single opening. The entire thing rotates on its axis. Inside, there's barely room for a single person to stand without their shoulders touching the walls.

"What are you taking?" Kim asks.

Wheeler ducks to step in, turns to face him and shrugs. "A stick of gum."

"I can get you field gear," Kim says, as the airlock begins to rotate again, emitting a low, quiet thrum solely as an audible warning that there is machinery in motion. "We'll raid inventory. Give me fifteen minutes and I'll turn you into a one-woman war."

If Wheeler says anything in response to this, it's cut off by the soundproofing as the airlock rotates.

Kim is left alone in the antechamber. He stares at the outer door for a worried moment. He presses his ear to the door for a while, but hears nothing. Not even a faint tremble from the airlock mechanism.

*

Inside it's pitch dark for a few seconds, then some unseen sensor detects Wheeler's presence and brings the fluorescents up. Half of them, anyway. The others remain inert or flicker aggravatingly.

The room's interior walls are made from milky white glass (bulletproof, knowing Hughes) and plastered with paperwork, taped and Blu-Tacked up in vaguely coherent masses. Where there is no paperwork, people have drawn directly on the walls in marker pen. There is a conference table, long and elliptical, covered with more paperwork and a tangle of laptop computers and serpentine power supply cables. Power has returned to the machines and they are slowly booting. A data projector warms up and shines a map of the world over the far wall, almost lining up with a network of scribbled annotations on the same wall. Post-It notes of all colours litter the carpet like autumn leaves.

Other than that, the room is empty.

Skimming the paperwork, Wheeler discovers that nearly all of it is handwritten and most of it charts the progress of conversations. Most of the entries are dated and signed, and most of the dates are weeks apart. The conversations are panicked and fearful back-and-forths about dozens of SCPs, some of them antimemetic in nature but none of them obviously related to one another. None of the notes mention SCP-3125.

The only name Wheeler recognises is her own, which appears on one in ten or twenty of the notes. The notes seem authentic and the handwriting is hers. But her notes also seem as desperate and uncertain in tone as everybody else's. This unnerves her.

There are diagrams on the walls too, which are too complex to decode at a glance, but complex enough to make her eyes hurt to look at them.

Still lost for a logical entry point to the data, Wheeler curses all of her predecessors. Asynchronous research — whereby the research topic is forgotten entirely between iterations, and rediscovered over and over — is a perfectly standard practice in the Antimemetics Division, and her people ought to be better trained than this. There should be an obvious single document to read first which makes sense of the rest. A primer—

"Marion, it's me."

Wheeler recognises the voice as her own. She moves around the table

until she finds the laptop making the noise. There's a video playing, apparently recorded on the laptop's own camera in this room.

The Marion Wheeler in the video is seated, and looks unfamiliar in a way which takes the one watching a moment to put her finger on. Not exhausted, not sick, not physically injured; she's seen herself that way before, in the mirror. This woman's willpower is gone. She's beaten.

"You've guessed already that SCP-3125 is not in this room," she says. "In fact, this is the only room in the world where SCP-3125 is not present. It's called 'inverted containment'. SCP-3125 pervades all of reality except for volumes which have been specifically shielded from its influence. This is it. This is our only safe harbor. This room represents the length and breadth of the war.

"Every competent antimemetics research project finds SCP-3125's fingerprints sooner or later. It manifests all over the world, in thousands of different forms. Most of them aren't even anomalous. Some of them we already have catalogued separately in the main database. A very small number of them are even in containment. Impossibly virulent cults, broken arithmetic, invisible spiders as tall as skyscrapers, people born with extra organs which nobody can see. That's the raw data. Those manifestations are troublesome enough to deal with in their own right..."

The Wheeler in the video casts around, picks up a bright green felt-tip pen and a blank piece of paper. She begins drawing a shape which isn't visible from the camera's perspective, while still talking.

"But once you get a little further down the road you start to see a pattern emerging in the data. You need to have the training in memetic science, but once you have that training and you have the data in front of you, it only takes a little extra effort to arrange those data points in conceptual space and draw a contour through them. Those data points are points on SCP-3125's hull; those manifestations are the shadows it casts on our reality. You link four or five different SCPs together into a single shape, and you see it... And it sees you..."

She's still drawing. It's detailed. She doesn't look up, and her tone of voice is distant, almost as if she's narrating the tail end of a frightening children's story:

"When that happens, when you make 'eye contact', it kills you. It kills you and it kills anybody who thinks like you. Physical distance doesn't matter, it's about mental proximity. Anybody with the same ideas,

anybody in the same head space. It kills your collaborators, your whole research team. It kills your parents; it kills your children. You become absent humans, human-shaped shells surrounding holes in reality. And when it's done, your project is a hole in the ground, and nobody knows what SCP-3125 is anymore. It is a black hole in antimemetic science, consuming unwary researchers and yielding no information, only detectable through indirect observation. A true description of what SCP-3125 is, or even an allusion to what it is, constitutes a containment breach and a lethal indirect cognitohazard.

"Do you see? It's a defense mechanism. This information-swallowing behaviour is just the outer layer, the poison coating. It protects the entity from discovery while it infests our reality.

"And as years pass, the manifestations will continue, growing denser and knitting together... until the whole world is drowning in them, and everybody will be screaming 'Why did nobody realise what was happening?' And nobody will answer, because everybody who realised was killed, by this *system*...

"Do you see it, Marion? See it now."

Wheeler is at the core of Foundation antimemetic science. She had all the raw data readily accessible. There are extensive written calculations on the walls, but she doesn't need to read them, she can do them in her head. All it took was that slightest push, that slightest suggestion. Staring through the laptop screen, eyes wide and defocused, she understands how it all links together. She sees SCP-3125.

She feels dwarfed by it. She's encountered terrible, powerful ideas before, at every level of memeticity, and subdued them or even recruited them, but what she's picturing now is on another order of magnitude from what she knew to be possible. Now that she knows it's there, she can feel it like cosmic radiation, boring holes in the world with its thousands of manifestations and freely laying waste to anybody who recognises the larger pattern. It's not of reality, not of humanity. It is from a higher, worse place, and it is descending.

The other Wheeler presents her finished diagram. She has drawn a mutated, fractally complex grasping hand with fivefold symmetry. It has no wrist or arm, just five long human fingers pointing in five directions. At its core, there's a pentagonal opening which could be a mouth.

But the diagram was already there. It's plastered across the wall in the background of the video, plain as day, a meticulous collage in green, easily two metres in diameter and showing the same meme complex to a hundred times the level of detail. There are smaller diagrams of different elevations arrayed around it like spores, and its arms are spread wide around the seated Wheeler, who sits directly in front of the mouth, with her back to it.

Wheeler, watching, does not realise this, and does not turn around.

"How do you fight an enemy without ever discovering it exists?" the Wheeler in the video asks. "How do you win without even realising you're at war? What do we *do*?

"Seven years ago there were more than four hundred antimemetics research groups worldwide. Government agencies, military branches, private corporations, university projects. Many of them were GOIs or subdivisions of GOIs. We were allied with most of them. We were at the spearhead of an Antimemetics Coalition which spanned the whole globe and thousands upon thousands of people. None of those groups still exist. The last one ceased to exist some time in the last seventy-two hours.

"Three years ago, Foundation Antimemetics was an organisation of more than four thousand people. Now it's ninety.

"There's no war. We've lost the war. It's over. This is the mopping-up operation. The only reason we still exist at all is because we have better amnestic biochemistry than anybody else in the world. Because that's all you can do when you see SCP-3125: run away and try to forget what you saw... seek oblivion in chemicals, or alcohol, or head trauma. And even that can't work every time. It's circling in. We meet it over and over again and we don't realise it. There's no way we can stop ourselves from rediscovering it! We're too damned smart!"

She points at something on the wall, out of view of the laptop's camera. Wheeler, watching, turns to look. In an upper corner of the room there is a constellation of dizzyingly complicated schematics. Bart Hughes's initials are on every page.

"There's a machine we could build. All it would take is eight years, a lab as big as West Virginia and all the money in the world. Nothing that the O5 Council would blink at if we went to them. But how do we build that machine without any of us realising what it's for? It would be like building and launching Apollo 11 without a single engineer

deducing that the Moon existed. The logistics would be insane, but the secrecy would be well past impossible. Someone would start asking questions. And then it would be over. So what do we do?"

"Find another way," Wheeler says to the unhearing recording. The fatalistic tone of voice makes her angry. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

"...I could tell everybody to walk away. I could send a little message to myself saying 'There's danger down this road, you should disband the Antimemetics Division and pursue other projects.' But I'd be suspicious. I'd start asking questions. And then it would be over."

Wheeler's now crouched in front of the video, trying to understand what she's watching. "What's wrong, Marion? Are you okay?"

"I could kill myself in here," the recording says. "But my team would find SCP-3125 without me, and then they'd have to fight SCP-3125 without me. It's going to happen soon, whatever happens. In the next two months at most. This year, it will be over. I may die in here anyway. I'm on so many mnestic drugs that my endocrine system is shutting down. Taking amnestics at the same time is the chemical equivalent to trepanation. I don't remember the last time I slept without having a nightmare about Adam, and I'm starting to forget whether SCP-4987 is a real thing or just the number that I gave to my life—"

"You're not like this," Wheeler whispers. "You're stronger than this. What happened to you? Who's Adam?"

"I don't know how we survive this. I don't know how we win. We're the last ones in the world. After us, there's nobody."

Wheeler shakes her head, not believing it.

"So I'm done. I'm going to walk out of this door and forget who I am and then I'm going to be you, Marion, and you trwoll have to figure a way out of this, because I can't." She gets up and moves offscreen. She can be heard breathing deeply. Her speech is starting to distort. "God, my eyes hurt. I think ilr starting infth mlaei inside."

There's the sound of a door opening, and then a piercing pulse of sound and light which terminates the recording.

*

Wheeler stares at the dark screen for a long minute.

She's never seen herself so weak, and it damages her ego a great deal to see that it's possible. She feels disconnected from what she saw, like it happened in an alternate universe. She feels revulsed and appalled by that version of her, more so to know that that version is still inside her somewhere. *It doesn't make sense. I'm looking at all of the same facts. What made her give up? What did she know that I don't?*

Who was Adam?

The answer to this question is so obvious and sickening that she instinctively distrusts it. She circles around the answer, probing it, trying to find reasons to reject it, but it's inescapable. Adam was someone she knew when the video was recorded, now completely removed from her memory. Adam was someone the thought of whose safety paralysed her with fear. Someone in the same head space. Someone she couldn't bear to lose.

And then she lost.

But what if...

(But how'd the room get built in the first place? Anybody's guess. Wheeler imagines Hughes building it as a proof-of-concept, followed by a cascading series of lucky chances which led to it becoming the war room. Someone discovered SCP-3125 at random, while sealed in the room; they wrote notes to themselves which set up the skeletal external SCP database entry and the containment procedures; most of the paperwork and computer hardware was left behind by later visitors... It could have happened...)

But what if there's another room?

Unbidden, a cute factoid comes back to her right then. Site 41 is almost completely vacant. In particular, two hundred metres below Site 41 there's an empty heavy engineering lab, an underground complex the size of a hockey stadium. Self-contained, in pristine condition, totally disused. Sealed up, original purpose forgotten. Nobody has entered it in living memory. Built who-knows-how-many decades back by a dead generation of antimemeticists.

What if that's where we built our weapon?

Do I really believe I'm that smart? That my team and I had that much foresight? That we got that lucky?

She turns to look at the airlock, running the numbers in her head.

Antimemetics Division staff, other than me: thirty-eight. Forty-two days until the next iteration. That's past the end of the year. It'll be too late. If I leave this room now, I will never be back. The plan I have now is the best plan there's ever going to be.

We're the last ones in the world. After us, there's nobody.

*

Kim is so deeply buried in work at his terminal and the airlock is so quiet that he almost doesn't notice when it starts to cycle open again.

"We need to check you for notes," he begins, but then he sees that Marion Wheeler is curled up in the bottom of the narrow cylinder, panting as though she just finished a marathon run. Kim holds a hand out but she shakes her head, electing to stay lying down, knees bent up to her chest, sucking down lungfuls of air.

"What in the world happened in there?" Kim asks.

"Just need..." she gasps, "...to breathe. Be okay in a... second. Haaaaah. I think I blacked out for a moment, might have inhaled some. Haaaaah. I think I'm okay. I remember the plan."

Kim looks confused and worried for a second, then they replace him. "You shouldn't be able to remember anything... what did you do?"

"Hit my head," Wheeler says, then goes back to concentrating on breathing properly. She suddenly becomes acutely aware that Kim has her effectively cornered. Disliking this configuration for reasons which she's only gradually putting back together, she levers herself up to one shoulder and tries to stand. Kim puts a hand on her shoulder and pushes her back down.

"You look terrible," he says. "There's something inl fleth your neck. Do you see that?" He points at her throat, then taps the same spot on his

own.

"What?"

"On your neck. I nefth hlai you've been infected by whatever was in there. We need to act quickly." He reaches for his keyring and unthreads a Swiss Army knife, and unfolds a short, gleaming blade. He does this in such a methodical, ordinary way that Wheeler almost forgets to react when he leans down towards her to cut her throat.

Almost. She grips his wrist. They're locked like that for a moment, a tableau. She looks into Paul Kim's eye, but it isn't his eye anymore. She squints, wondering if she's making eye contact with anything but a hole in space. She already feels the force bearing down on her own skull, trying to drill into it, but she knows its shape and that means she can hold out, maybe for a few minutes. She had hoped, prayed, that Kim would not succumb so quickly. And in a crazed little way she'd thought there would be at least a sign, a theatrical doubling-over as his mind was wrenched out of its socket.

Kim's wrist spasms as he tries to lunge with the knife. Wheeler parries and its tip glances off the airlock interior wall with a screech. They scuffle for an awkward second, then she boots Kim in the stomach with both feet, sending him sprawling in the antechamber. She launches out of the airlock, dives over him and sprints away from the containment unit.

She feels SCP-3125 following her as she runs, like a spotlight. She hears a crash in another part of the Site, as the first piece of ceiling caves in.

Your Last First Day

Marion Wheeler is curled in the corner of Site 41's main freight elevator, descending, clutching a shiny red ray gun almost as long as she is tall. The gun has a two-tined prong instead of a barrel and its stock is a weirdly asymmetrical mass of pipework, more like a Swiss watch or a small intestinal tract than a weapon. The gun is SCP-7381, and it comes from a long-dead planet — not too distant a planet, when all's said and done — which conventional astronomy has yet to observe.

A tornado of violence and destruction is tearing through Site 41 and through the minds of everybody working at Site 41. Ceilings are being brought down, the site pharmacy is a sucking hole at the side of the building. The armoury is buried; that's why she had to go through Area 09 and is now toting anomalous weaponry instead. The Antimemetics Division operatives she meets in the corridors are all broken; some of them curled up and raving while their minds evaporate and they die one memory at a time, some infected with a collection of ideas which compel them to shout guttural phrases in strange languages, and to procure blades — never guns — and work on those demented victims, and each other, and themselves.

Wheeler doesn't recognise any of the people. Their faces are all wrong, torn up with hatred and misery and vindictive glee. She's been trying to avoid fighting, but she's had to kill one man in self-defence. Fired at his heart, SCP-7381 simply erased a half-metre-wide cylinder of matter, removing his upper torso and lower jaw. He fell to the ground in four pieces. SCP-7381's beam is invisible, silent and recoilless. It was like using a child's toy gun.

Wheeler is petrified, but more than that, angry. "This is too much," she says, out loud, willing her heart rate back under control. "I can't deal with this. I shouldn't have to deal with this. It's my fucking first day!"

*

But how much sense does that make? Wheeler studies her reflection in

the dark glass of the elevator control panel, and she tours the interior of her own skull, examining her thought processes. There are hints there, which would be difficult to articulate to someone who didn't know her as well as she knows herself. She isn't thinking like a newbie. She's instinctively breaking the problem apart, the way an experienced Foundation operative should. Hell, a newbie wouldn't even know how to carry out a detailed psychological self-examination of this kind. A newbie wouldn't even think of it, a newbie would just suffocate.

"The first thing it did when it saw me," she explains to her reflection, "was eat everything I knew about the Division. And everything I knew about *it*. If I had a plan, it ate the plan. ...But I'm still me. So I can come up with that plan again. It's already right in front of me, I just need to see it. If I were me, what would my plan have been?"

She scratches absently at her left wrist.

"Taking some hardcore mnestic drugs would have been a smart first step, I guess," she mutters. "Reinforcing my mind, so that it can't erase the rest of the steps. Damn." The nearest source of mnestic medicine is the site pharmacy, but it's already been destroyed, and in any case the elevator is headed down, away from it.

No. Stop. The pharmacy's been destroyed? How do I know that?

Well, because she was there. She remembers finding the pharmacist crushed to death beneath a fallen medical cabinet, her skull an unrecognisable splatter of scarlet. She remembers the floor being torn away beneath her feet, and only barely making it out of that portion of the building alive.

She remembers— a modular package coloured Safety Orange, with an enormous black Z on it. Her heart nearly stops at this. *Oh, God. What did I do?*

She remembers the dozens of warning signs covering the package; she remembers the three-factor authorisation procedure she had to follow to get into the sealed container where it was stored; she remembers the centimetre-thick book of medical advisory information, which she discarded; and, rolling her left sleeve back, she finds a fresh needle mark with a speck of blood, and remembers administering the injection.

This was my plan? This is what it takes to fight SCP-3125? I've killed myself—

Class-Z mnestics are the last word in biochemical memory fortification. Class-Z mnestics permanently destroy the subject's ability to forget. The result is perfect eidetic memory and perfect immunity to arbitrarily strong antimemetic interference.

The dose is taking effect now. Wheeler didn't read the book because she already knew every word of it. She knows everything that's about to happen to her. She can already feel her mind hardening, like steel, and the developing symptoms of extreme sensory overload.

She can see everything.

There are extra buttons on the elevator control panel, the lowest of which, the thirtieth floor below ground level, she's somehow already pushed. The walls of the elevator are covered with graffiti scrawled by the desperate and dying, people whose conceptual presence was eradicated from reality years earlier by the Alastair Grey antimemetic kill agent, reducing them to the level of ghosts. In one corner of the freight elevator there is even a half-corpse, unidentifiable, so many layers removed from reality that not even flies can smell it, its cells winking out of existence asymptotically over the course of years.

There is a fistful of tiny white worms exploring the floor of the elevator car, near where she's sitting. Revolted, Wheeler shuffles back from them, shaking one or two more of them out of her hair. The worms are among the most widespread and successful antimemetically cloaked organisms in the world. They are everywhere, in every biome, in every room.

She can hear a long, alarming drone noise, a continual roaring which has the texture of ambient noise and is continually getting louder. It's as if it's been there for her entire life, and it's only now that she's begun to hear it.

It's too much data. Too much sound, too much light. Having her eyes open is like jamming them full of needles. She clamps her hands over her ears and screws her eyes up. Even like this, she feels the vibration of the elevator's slow descent and the heat of the failed air conditioning and the movement of her clothes on her skin, and meanwhile her vision is flooding instead with what could be hallucinations. The human sensorium routinely generates huge amounts of data and the human brain is adapted to discard almost all of that data nearly immediately. Altering the brain's behaviour to retain that data is extremely dangerous even for very short time spans.

Wheeler takes one hand away from her ear for just long enough to punch the metal wall of the elevator car, bloodying two knuckles. The pain gives her a focal point, a memory which screams a little louder than the rest.

And she finds the plan. She doesn't remember it; she bootstraps it from first principles, in a handful of minutes, just like she's done a hundred times before.

"I know how to beat you," she says.

"No," SCP-3125 says to her. "You don't."

*

The elevator stops at the thirtieth floor below ground and its doors grind open. They wait, open, for a long time. Further up the elevator shaft there are the distant rumbles of more parts of Site 41 being reduced to crumbs.

Still crouched in the corner, Wheeler mutters, "SCP-3125 doesn't have a voice."

"Of course I do," it replies.

"SCP-3125 is a five-dimensional anomalous metastasized mass of bad memes and bad antimemes and everything in between, seeping through to our physical reality. It isn't coherent and it isn't intelligent. It can't communicate. This is an auditory hallucination."

SCP-3125 scoffs. "You know what I hate most about you, Marion? You're consistently, eternally *wrong*... and yet you're still alive. All those lost battles, every year of that entire lost war, but somehow you always cobble together enough dumb luck to walk away unscathed. The eternal sole survivor. You don't deserve that kind of luck. Nobody does."

While it's talking, Wheeler leans hard on the ray gun to get to her feet. She lodges one shoulder against the wall of the elevator car, still with her eyes closed. She braces herself, and opens her eyes. The corridor ahead is empty. There's an airlock at the far end, this one large enough to drive a truck through, built from ultra-toughened white metal alloy in Bart Hughes's established style. There's a panel beside

the airlock. She closes her eyes again and hobbles forward, using the ray gun as a crutch, stretching one hand out ahead of her as guidance.

"Someone has to be last," she says, gritting her teeth. "Someone has to be the best."

"Your team is dead," SCP-3125 says. "Their minds have been pulled out, like eyeballs. They're hollow people, with holes in space where their brains were. The war is over! Finally! It's just *you*, Marion, a division of one! Dying from mnestic overdose, two hundred metres underground, cared for by no one, known to exist to no one, up against an immortal, unkillable idea."

Wheeler reaches the airlock and fumbles blindly with the panel until she finds the slot for her keycard. For a few seconds it seems as if nothing is happening, then a yellow light flashes, the enormous mechanical interlocks unlatch and the door cycles open with all the fuss of a flower's petals unfurling. Noise, Hughes always held, is a symptom of imperfect engineering.

Behind her, she hears the freight elevator close up and return to ground level, and she knows that someone has summoned it, intending to pursue her.

"Ideas can be killed," she says, stepping into the airlock.

"How?"

"With better ideas."

As the airlock cycles closed, so does the hermetic seal. SCP-3125 is shut out.

*

If something can cross over from conceptual space into reality, taking physical form, then something can cross in the opposite direction. It must be possible to take a physical entity, mechanically extract the *idea which it embodies*, amplify that idea and broadcast it up into conceptual space. A bigger idea. A better idea, one designed specifically to fight SCP-3125.

An ideal. A movement. A hero.

The machine Wheeler needs to build is the size of an Olympic stadium, and she doesn't have a fraction of the heavy memetic engineering experience to do it, let alone the material resources or the time. But she knows — someone taught her, she doesn't remember who — that an Antimemetics Division operative is as good on their first day as they're ever likely to be. And the same must be true of the Division as a whole.

She tells herself: *We won this war on the day it began. When we encountered SCP-3125 for the first time, we built this bunker. Bart Hughes faked his death and sequestered himself here so he could work uninterrupted, while the rest of the Division held on for as long as humanly possible, buying time for this moment. I know this is what I did, because it's what I would have done.*

I'm the final component. He's waiting for me.

*

The space beyond the airlock is gigantic, structured and lit like an aircraft hangar and filled with hot, stale, dry air. Wheeler, still mostly blind, stumbles forward across an expanse of more than a hectare of flat, dusty epoxy flooring. "Hughes!" she shouts into the void. "It's time!" Nothing comes back but the echo.

She glances up for a second. The space is empty. The castle-sized memetic amplification/broadcasting unit which Bart Hughes was meant to be building is absolutely absent. Hughes himself is absent.

Maybe the entire machine is antimemetically cloaked? she wonders, momentarily. It would be a smart way to conceal the operation even from the rest of the Foundation. But her brain is curdling in the strongest mnestic drugs ever manufactured. There's genuinely nothing here.

Almost nothing. At the centre of the space there's a small outpost, a group of trestle tables with tools and toolboxes scattered about the place. Parked behind it is an unmarked military truck with flat tyres. On the back of the truck is a squat, squarish machine the size of a shipping container, with unshielded wiring and exposed pipework, and a long cable leading to a heavy-duty control panel on the floor. To the untrained eye, it is not at all clear what the machine is designed to

do.

It's the antimemetic equivalent to a hydrogen bomb; the Division's answer to a site nuclear warhead. Activated, it would contaminate Site 41 and everything and everyone on it with antimemetic radiation. There would be no Site 41 and no Division afterwards; nothing any of the escaping, infectious staff did could have any effect on the real world.

It's the wrong machine.

It can't destroy or contain SCP-3125, or even injure it. All it can do is sterilise today's outbreak. The other symptoms will persist. Fifty or ten or five years from now, or maybe one year or maybe *tomorrow*, SCP-3125 will return, bringing with it its MK-class end-of-world scenario. Human civilisation will be entirely eradicated as an abstract concept, and be replaced with something unimaginably worse. There will be no one to fight it.

Wheeler leans there on the ray gun for a long moment. The pressure of information in her mind, continually increasing, reaches a point where she can't take it any more, and she starts to break. The Class-Z has been in her system for long enough now that she knows for a fact she has irreversible brain damage. There is no antidote. She'll be lucid for another hour, then spend the remaining two or three hours of her life vegetative.

That's right, she thinks. It's almost a relief. *This is good. This is right.*

I've survived too long. I forgot what universe this was. For a while there, I thought, maybe... this was the universe where we win sometimes.

The agony in her head is like an ice axe now. She drops the ray gun with a clatter, sinks to her knees, lies down and waits for either death or a better idea.

*

A being superficially resembling Paul Kim arrives at the outer airlock door. It examines the airlock uncomprehendingly for a few moments, then finds the keycard slot. It hunts methodically through Kim's pockets, then remembers the keycard around its neck. The airlock

cycles once more and not-Kim goes through. Behind it, the freight elevator is returning to ground level a third time, to fetch the rest.

In the next room, the being which is not Paul Kim finds Wheeler, unconscious, with the ray gun dropped beside her. There is also a military truck, which it disregards.

Not-Kim lets its keycard fall from its fingers and scoops up the ray gun. For a moment it contemplates the unconscious Wheeler, then examines at the gun itself, remembering how it works. It turns back to face the airlock and fires, punching fat cylindrical holes in the white metal of the inner door until it's gone, then the outer door too, breaching the hermetic seal. A faint smile returns to not-Kim's face as SCP-3125 and its familiar, comforting signals flood into the bunker.

A dozen more non-people are arriving by freight elevator, former Antimemetics Division bodies. "I've found her," not-Kim calls out to them. It drops the ray gun where it's standing, as if it simply forgot that it had been carrying anything, and pulls out its knife again. It holds the knife between two fingers, in a casual, offhand sort of way, as if it were a pencil or screwdriver.

The infected non-people gather with not-Kim around Wheeler, looking down at her with alien expressions of disgust, or pity, or malice.

"Why isn't she opening up properly?" someone asks. "She can't meet them unless she wants the signals."

"Start with her eyes," says someone else. "It'll make the rest of her easier to correct."

Not-Kim leans down to start work, then hesitates, its knife a few centimetres from Wheeler's eye. She's whispering something, so quietly that only it can hear her clearly.

"None of this happened, Paul," she says. "You and I never existed. There is no Antimemetics Division."

There's a sharp *click* as the bomb finishes its powering-up sequence. Nobody in the room can hear this but Wheeler. Nobody in the room can perceive the bomb but Wheeler. All they can see is an empty truck.

The world goes black.

Interlude

SCP-2256: Very Tall Things

Item #: SCP-2256

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: Information about SCP-2256 is subject to a gradual antimemetic corrosion effect. Corrosion occurs at differing rates depending on the level of detail/accuracy in the information and the physical complexity of the storage medium. In-depth academic papers, photographs, and information stored electronically decay rapidly; broad descriptions, pencil sketches and paperwork decay slowly.

Therefore, this electronic database entry should describe SCP-2256 only in broad terms. Detailed information about SCP-2256's appearance, theorised evolutionary ancestry, biology, diet, behaviour, vocalisations, lifecycle, intelligence, ecological role and cultural significance should be stored in hard copy at Site 19, vault 1-053. The rate of corrosion in both data sources should be monitored carefully, although at present no technique is known for halting or undoing such corrosion.

Although these antimemetic effects linger and rate Euclid classification, SCP-2256 itself is extinct and requires no special containment procedures.

Description: SCP-2256 (*Cryptomorpha gigantes*) is a species of gigafauna which was endemic to the South Pacific Ocean around the islands of Polynesia. SCP-2256 was one of the very few recorded species known to have developed rudimentary perceptual/"antimemetic" camouflage, rendering them nearly impossible for other sentient beings to perceive or remember. This adaptation is theorised to have arisen in order to elude predators.

SCP-2256 was the largest species to have lived on Earth. Resembling spindly, vertically elongated giraffes or brachiosauruses, adults of the species grew to over 1,000 metres in height. They weighed no more than 4 tonnes, with most of their mass being "camouflaged" by a very similar adaptation. With their broad, dish-shaped feet, they were able to walk directly on the surface of the ocean without sinking.

SCP-2256 navigated the ocean alone or in □□□□□□ of 2 to as many as 2,000 individuals. They were reluctant to approach land, especially inhabited islands, usually staying more than 30 kilometres offshore. Because of their height, they were visible on the horizon at this distance.

Acquisition: Polynesian natives of the island of Maikiti used a substance called *teùkoka* for recreational and religious purposes. As well as being a moderate psychedelic, this drug had mnestic properties, suppressing antimemetic effects and making entities camouflaged in this way easier to see and remember. Thus, the Maikitians were for hundreds of years the only people able to see SCP-2256. In Maikitian mythology SCP-2256 were wandering spirits whom the gods had charged with maintaining the horizon, to ensure that the sky and the water never mixed. They were characterised as well-meaning and friendly, but unintelligent and often deficient in their duties, resulting in storms and typhoons. They were called *polo'ongakau*, "the ones who walk very slowly".

In 1991 an internal biochemistry study revealed that *teùkoka* bore a strong chemical resemblance to the Foundation's own class-W mnestic. A Foundation anthropologist was assigned to follow □□ □□ the Maikitian legend, and became the first outsider to observe □□□-2256. An observation □□□□□□ was quickly □□□□□□□□□□□ on the island to study the creatures. Routine containment analysis found that SCP-2256 was Safe and required no special containment procedures, or even particular □□□□□□□□□□ □□ secrecy.

History: SCP-□□□□ immediately proved to be impossible to capture photographically. Photographic negatives of the species faded into transparency over the □□□□□□ □□ a few minutes. Similar decay □□□□□□□ affected videotape, audio tape, celluloid film, digital and electronic scans, □□□. The observation team soon returned most of their equipment to inventory and proceeded using pencils and □□□□□. At the time, it □□□ believed that such recordings would be effectively permanent.

SCP-2256's population declined slightly in 1992 and 1993, then dropped sharply from 1994 onwards. A combination of contributing factors were observed: illness, infertility and an □□□□□□□□□□ rate of stillbirths.

In 2002 a field generator was developed which could penetrate and neutralise SCP-2256's antimemetic □□□□□□□□□□, allowing for conventional photography. The first and only close-up photograph of

one of the creatures instantly killed it. It was concluded that direct observation of SCP-2256 is injurious to [redacted]. This adaptation is believed to have arisen as a means of detecting predators, just as SCP-2256's antimemetic camouflage protected them from those same predators. Use of [redacted] generator was immediately curtailed.

It was subsequently hypothesised that the Foundation's ongoing passive observation of the species was intense enough to have harmful effects on SCP-2256, and that [redacted] was what was driving the species [redacted] extinction. Opinions differed sharply [redacted] [redacted] veracity of this hypothesis, over [redacted] thoroughly it should be tested, and over what [redacted] be done if it proved to be true. Several extreme options were [redacted], including [redacted] exterminating [redacted]-[redacted] to preserve the data, and completely expunging the data to preserve [redacted]-2256. No firm conclusions [redacted] [redacted].

In 2003 observation of SCP-2256 was scaled back significantly, and the Foundation [redacted] focus from gathering [redacted] data to analysing [redacted] data. However, SCP-2256's population continued to [redacted]. The last individual died near Tokelau [redacted] October 30, 2006.

[redacted] 2010 [redacted] [redacted] discovered [redacted] the antimemetic camouflage [redacted], also characterised as "decay" or "corrosion", was spreading through paper records of [redacted]-[redacted]. As of [redacted], more [redacted] 60% of [redacted] documents are [redacted], even with [redacted] strong mnestic dose. The effect is even [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] SCP entry itself, despite [redacted] [redacted] shielding and redundancy in [redacted] system.

Since [redacted]-[redacted] [redacted] extinct, [redacted] new data [redacted] it can be generated. It is [redacted] that full contamination [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] three to eight years.

Part II: Five Five Five Five Five

SCP-3125: The Escapee

Item #: SCP-3125

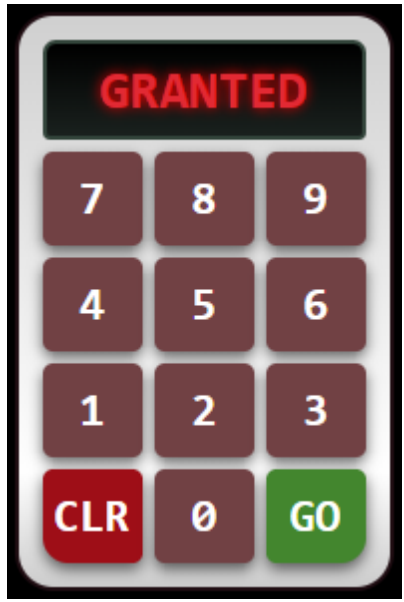
Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-3125 is kept inside Cognitohazard Containment Unit 3125 on the first floor of Site 41. This containment unit is a 10m by 15m by 3m cuboidal room clad in layers of lead, soundproofing and telepathic shielding. Access is through an airlock system at one end of the containment unit. This airlock is programmed to allow only one person to enter the containment unit at a time, and to remain locked until this person exits before allowing another person to enter.

Under no circumstances may any coherent information be allowed to leave the containment unit. This includes written and electronic notes, photographs, audio and video recordings, sound, electromagnetic and particle-based signals and psi emanations. During the exit cycle, a purge system rigged to the airlock flushes the occupant's memory by flooding the airlock with amnestic gas for three minutes.

A senior Antimemetics Division staff member must visit SCP-3125 every six weeks (42 days).

END OF FILE



Item #: SCP-3125

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-3125 is subject to inverted containment protocols, and is present everywhere in reality except for those places which have been specifically purged of its influence. The interior of Cognitohazard Containment Unit 3125 on Site 41, where this document resides, is the only location in the world known to have been successfully purged in this way. This containment unit is a 10m by 15m by 3m cuboidal room clad in layers of lead, soundproofing material and telepathic shielding. Access is through an airlock system at one end of the containment unit. This airlock is programmed to allow only one person to enter the containment unit at a time, and to remain locked until this person exits before allowing another person to enter.

Under no circumstances may any coherent information be allowed to leave the containment unit. This includes written and electronic notes, photographs, audio and video recordings, sound, electromagnetic and particle-based signals and psi emanations. A purge system rigged to the airlock flushes the occupant's memory by flooding the airlock with amnestic gas for three minutes during the exit cycle.

An alternate SCP entry must be maintained in the main Foundation

database, giving only the technical specifications of the containment unit, provisions for senior Antimemetics Division staff to visit the unit's interior on a regular basis, and no description.

Description: SCP-3125 is an extremely large (see full Θ'-dimensional fractal topology, attachment 13), highly aggressive anomalous metastasized meme complex originating externally to our reality and now partially intersecting it.

SCP-3125 is adapted for survival in an ideatic ecology considerably more violent and hostile than our own. (Here, "our own" refers to human head space: the set of all ideas which humans have or are biologically capable of having.) Because humans have no natural exposure to ideas as aggressive as SCP-3125, human minds have no protective evolutionary adaptations against it. Individuals possessed of SCP-3125 become incapable of entertaining weaker, "conventional" ideas, and become instead wholly bodily subordinate to the purpose of serving and disseminating the core concepts of SCP-3125. In addition, although undergoing no outwardly visible physical alteration, they cease to be externally recognisable as human.

SCP-3125 is not yet entirely present in our reality. Upon its arrival, the highly interconnected nature of human knowledge exchange systems means that it will take no longer than twelve hours, possibly as few as four hours, to encompass, dominate and replace all human thought. At this point, "humanity" as an abstract concept, along with all attendant abstracts such as "civilization", "culture", "society", "community" and "family" will have ceased to exist. The Foundation terms such an eventuality an *MK-class end-of-world scenario*.

The Foundation possesses numerous proven techniques for arresting the spread of such aggressive idea complexes, but these are all rendered unworkable in practice by SCP-3125's autonomic defensive response/boundary layer. Fully assembling a mental picture of SCP-3125 and perceiving its true shape causes SCP-3125 in turn to be able to perceive the observer. It then attacks the observer, killing them. The mechanism of the attack is unclear, but appears to be at least partially physical. "Mental bystanders", individuals whose thoughts and ideas resemble those of the observer, are also attacked. This invariably includes the observer's entire extended research group, and often their close family (parents and offspring).

The attack has the net effect of erasing all knowledge both of SCP-3125 and its attack from the world. This informational "numbing" effect performs a similar function to the anaesthetic saliva of a

mosquito's bite, enabling SCP-3125 to evade detection prior to its full incarnation.

Foundation staff discovering SCP-3125 may be able to escape its attack via prompt use of amnestic medication to erase their knowledge of it.

In either case, the net result is that the interior of a suitably shielded containment unit is the only location where it is safe to observe, record or even acknowledge the existence of SCP-3125. Outside of such a containment unit, a true written description of SCP-3125 would constitute a lethal cognitohazard.

SCP-3125 could be effectively neutralized using a machine proposed by the late Dr. Bartholomew Hughes called an *irreality amplifier* (see schematics, attachment 129). However, as well as requiring tremendous material resources, this machine could not be constructed without its builders understanding why it was being built, which would require an understanding of SCP-3125, which would prove fatal to the project.

No means of neutralizing SCP-3125 using only the resources in this room is known.

History: Due to the described defense mechanism, SCP-3125's observation history is almost entirely missing. In particular, it is unclear exactly how this containment unit came to be built and how these containment procedures were established.

Much data has been accrued in this containment unit over the course of successive visits by Foundation researchers. This data was brought from the outside in the hope of being useful and left here in accordance with containment procedures. In addition to this database entry, the reader will find multiple electronic copies of the Foundation database, academic data sets of all kinds and extensive public news archives.

As is to be expected, much of this data is not germane to the topic of containing SCP-3125. Nevertheless, correlation and analysis by successive visitors has allowed the following facts to emerge:

1. Although SCP-3125 is not yet fully present in our reality, its indirect effects/foreshocks (for example, SCP-□□□, SCP-□□□□, SCP-□□□□ and SCP + □□□□□) are easily discovered by any well-equipped memetics research project.

2. Memetics research is, today, a much-diminished science from when it was at its peak. In mid-2008 there existed more than 400 institutions pursuing research likely to uncover SCP-3125, including government agencies, military branches, private corporations, independent laboratories, university research projects and notable amateur groups. Many of these were GOIs or internal divisions within GOIs. None of these groups still exist, except for the Foundation's Antimemetics Division.

3. Almost nobody in the world is consciously aware of this decline, and explanations for the disappearance of these groups have not been forthcoming.

Simple deduction gives that all of these groups eventually discovered SCP-3125 and were consumed by it, and that this is, in fact, the inevitable fate of all competent memetics research.

The Antimemetics Division's persistence is attributed to its specialist training and its ready access to reliable amnestic medication. Despite this, the Division, too, has shrunk considerably in recent years, from a reported staff of well over 4,000 people in 2012 to, as of September 2015, 125. This figure is on track to reach zero before the end of 2015. Over the same period, the Division's physical worldwide presence has similarly shrunk, from a network of Sites and smaller outposts on every continent to this single Site, Site 41. In particular, the Division's headquarters at Site 167 are now missing from the Division's collective memory and presumed neutralized by SCP-3125's concealment response.

Addendum: Further analysis of the available data — specifically, architectural diagrams of Site 41 (attachment 38) — indicates the existence of a second containment unit on Site 41 conforming to the same basic design philosophy as this one. This second unit, S041-B30-000, was built 210 metres below ground level; it features identical broad-spectrum informational cladding but has more than one thousand times the volume of Cognitohazard Containment Unit 3125, along with an amnestic airlock large enough to ingest a Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit shipping container.

Information relating to the date of construction and purpose of S041-B30-000 is absent from Foundation records and is presumed to have been deliberately erased. The unit itself is hermetically sealed, and has been for an indeterminate period of time.

Regardless of S041-B30-000's intended purpose, it, like any such

containment unit, is capable of acting as a shelter from SCP-3125.

Addendum 2:

> And the rest, hopefully, is blindingly obvious.
>
> S041-B30-000 was originally constructed to house a long-term project to construct Hughes' irreality amplifier. While that's been going on, the rest of us have been fighting an unconscious war in order to buy time. We have been losing, but losing as slowly as humanly possible.
>
> The time we have bought is now up. It's an extremely bad sign that nobody inside S041-B30-000 has broken the seal yet, but there is no ground left for us to cede, and there are no more bodies to throw into SCP-3125's maw to slow it down. ಽ is here, ready or not.
>
> I am going to go to S041-B30-000 and use the machine. I think I can get the information out through the airlock. I think I can get to the vault alive.
>
> This was the plan. It's become garbled in the retelling because of variables, but I know that this was my plan, because I know myself. What else could it have been?
>
> Standard procedure is that I have to tell you what to do next if this doesn't work. That's the asynchronous research covenant.
>
> But I don't have a good picture of who you can even be, reading this and alive. In your scenario there is no machine, Hughes is missing, I'm dead, the Site is ruined, and how'd you even get in here? Can you be Foundation? Are you conscious? Is there a single word of this which you comprehend?
>
> You live in a world bathed with SCP-3125. That's the loss condition.
>
> I can't help someone who doesn't exist.
>
> *Marion Wheeler, chief of Antimemetics*
> *November 30, 2015*

Addendum 3:

>

I found your body.

And finding your body was a powerfully disorienting sensation for me, I don't mind admitting. I used to know a Marion. During the brief period in which I knew her, she wasn't one to admit defeat as easily as you. Still, that was a long time ago...

Far be it from me to tell you your business, but I fear you missed a trick. From the evidence I can see, this was never the only "Antimemetics Division" Site. There were others. I imagine they're now all effectively invisible to (most) passers-by, of course, just like this one, but I presume that they, just like this one, still physically exist. Your plan, I think, was in place for longer than you know. And since you weren't at liberty to retain its details, you put it into action more than once.

There is another vault fitting the description, truck-sized amnestic airlock and all. S167-001-6183.

Site 167 is a non-entity, of course, which is most likely why you missed it. It's likely ruined, and it's quite definitely a *long God-damned way* from here on foot. But still! I think it's better than half a chance.

I could die on this boondoggle too, naturally, as the world has become something of a horror show of late. In any case, I trust that anybody following in my footsteps and reading these additional words will have the presence of mind to pursue the same basic strategy.

Still existing despite everything,

Adam Wheeler, interloper
May 4, 2017

END OF FILE

Where Have You Been All My Life

Who the *fuck* infiltrates a senior Foundation official's home, while they're home?

Marion Wheeler lives deep in coniferous forest, a long drive from the nearest major city and a long drive in the opposite direction from Site 41. It's late, last thing, and she's reading in bed when she hears the muffled, unmistakeable click of her front door being unlocked. She looks up, and stares blankly at the wall for a second while listening to soft footsteps moving into the hallway.

She marks her place and reaches for her Foundation-issued phone. She has no permanent security staff at home — the Division is understaffed and trained operatives are in much more serious need on Site — but the building and grounds have beefy electronic countermeasures. They, she discovers, have all been disabled, along with the sensors and cameras. She was not notified that this had happened. Whoever did it had a valid code.

Who, though?

The Foundation has enemies. True, the list of credible, motivated enemies is surprisingly short, and the list of groups stupid enough to try to kill or capture someone at her level is shorter. But it's far from empty, and it's not actually so hard a feat; not too many people below O5 level are privileged to travel in motorcades. The real trick, the impossible trick, is to avoid unholy retaliation. But what if you really think you can? What if you've decided it's worth it?

Wheeler triggers the silent alarm. She sets her phone back down on the nightstand and collects her gun. She rolls out of bed, tucks a few pillows in her place, moves silently to her bedroom door and stands beside it, listening and thinking.

This door, her bedroom door, can't be opened silently. It creaks like hell, so if she goes through it she'll have to be ready to draw attention. There's an attic, but access is out there on the landing and, again, can't be operated silently. There's no alternate route to ground level other than jumping from the window, and someone has to be covering it. Even if she landed in the bushes alive, she'd still have to break the perimeter with a sprained ankle.

A better question than "Who?" is "How many?" She may already be straight-up dead, simply due to numbers. If the attackers tread cautiously and try to flush her out, she figures she can *Home Alone* her way through perhaps eight of them before running out of luck. If they rush the second floor and have armor she might be overwhelmed by as few as two, even with the staircase acting as a choke point. All of this, naturally, assumes that the attackers aren't anomalous. If they are, and they're not in the, say, thirty percent of anomalies which can be neutralised simply by shooting them in the centre mass and head, she may be fundamentally helpless even after the response team shows up. Which will be, at best, ten minutes from now.

A creaking. This damned house. Someone is coming up the stairs, making no effort to be quiet about it. A soft tread, though. As if they removed their shoes. Just one of them? That barely makes sense.

With five seconds' grace, Wheeler casts around the dark room for a second weapon. She knows there are knitting needles downstairs in the lounge and knives, good ones, in the kitchen. But she can't get to them. It's too late. The door's opening. It seems like the man's trying to say something as he comes in, but he only gets as far as "I— *whulp*," and it's done. He's flat on his face, cheek pressed into deep cream carpet, with Wheeler on his back pinning both his wrists with her knees. She sights urgently back down the stairs for a second; there's no one there. She prods him in his other cheek with the muzzle of the gun. "You speak, you die," she hisses. "You try to move, you die." She glances at the windows, checks the stairs again, listens intently. There's no sound. There's nothing to be seen.

The man is fifty, and lanky. He wears an expensive dark suit, tailored to his build. He has angular features, thick, greying hair and rimless spectacles, now quite possibly bent out of shape by their sudden impact with the floor. He wears discreet platinum jewellery: a wristwatch, cufflinks and a ring.

The two of them halt like that, a tableau. He makes no attempt to move, although he does look askance at Wheeler, as best he can given his dislodged glasses.

Wheeler asks, "Where are the others?"

"It's just me, Marion," he answers.

"Who are you?"

He says nothing for a moment, but his expression slowly, subtly drops.

"I, ah. Well. Well, it really happened, didn't it? I always wondered."

"Who are you?"

"There is a monster which follows you around and eats your memories," the man says. "SCP-4987. You drip-feed it inconsequential trivia so it doesn't go after anything important. You watch game shows. The book you were reading just now. On your nightstand. It's a trivia book. Right?"

Wheeler says nothing to confirm or deny this, although it is true. At feeding time the entity manifests like a bright gold-white spot in the corner of her eye. It's gone now.

She's already put the rest of it together. It is all mind-bogglingly, insultingly obvious.

With a well-suppressed but still detectable note of dismay, she asks, "What's your name?"

"Adam," he says. "Adam Wheeler."

*

Obviously, she has the man detained.

She instructs her people to interrogate him — lightly — and to run deep background research on every word he utters, while for her part she stands far back from the investigation to avoid contamination. She resists the urge to interfere, particularly to visit "Adam" and personally demand answers. She goes to her office, curls up on the couch there and tries to catch some sleep, but doesn't succeed in any real sense.

Seven hours later a Foundationer knocks on her office door, bringing an inch-thick block of printouts and a paralysingly strong cup of coffee. Wheeler takes the drink first, accepting it as a kind of authentication step before letting the man in. She moves back to the couch and sits hunched over the drink for warmth, inhaling its fumes.

The man settles heavily into a chair opposite. He is a misleadingly stocky, perpetually unshaven individual, somewhere just shy of forty, and inarguably the most dangerous person on the Site. He is the Division's physical fitness and combat instructor and the leader of

their solitary Mobile Task Force. His name is Alex Gauss. "They, uh," he says, "figured I should be the one to present their results. Even though I didn't research one line of it. 'Cause we 'get along'. Their words. Personally, I don't see it."

Wheeler stays focused on the coffee. "Who is he?"

Gauss opens the first page of the report, more for show than anything, then closes it again. "He's your husband. Every word checks out. There is limitless physical evidence. Half of the Division knows him socially, including me. I credit your diligence and adherence to protocol, but the bottom line is that SCP-4987 got hungry."

Wheeler nods. This assessment matches her own, pieced together overnight from gut reactions and analysis of the plain facts. Where the hell else did her name come from? She wasn't born "Wheeler". But she had to get independent verification.

She asks, "Has this happened before?"

"No."

"Could it happen again?"

Gauss shrugs. "You would know better than anyone."

"I would. I do. And I can tell you this: I have SCP-4987 trained to follow me at my heel. I feed it according to a strict regimen, it eats only the memories I say it's okay to eat. A rapidly progressive, universally fatal memory parasite made chronic and then domesticated. And now, what, it suddenly breaks training? That adds up?"

"If you say it doesn't add up, it doesn't add up," Gauss says, cautiously. "But speaking from field experience, anything can happen twice."

Wheeler has waited long enough, and takes a long pull from the coffee. She stares into the coiling steam, as if trying to see the future. "But who is he?" she asks again. "At this point, you know him better than I do. What's he like? Do you like him?"

Gauss grimaces extravagantly. This is the great-great-grandmother of all loaded questions.

Wheeler looks him in the eye and says, "Tell me your personal impression of Adam Wheeler. Direct order."

"...He's a nice enough guy."

"'Nice enough'?"

Gauss clicks his tongue. "I don't like him," he admits. "Personally. All that much. We're civil. But he will always be a little bit too smug, and a little bit too clever. He just... grates. Would I throw someone in a cell for that? No."

"Do I like him?"

"You—" Gauss begins, then stops. He looks away. And over time, a soft smile develops on his face, one which Wheeler doesn't recall ever seeing before, not in a working relationship going back years. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah. He's the one."

*

> Full name: Adam Bellamy Wheeler. Born February 27, 1962 in Henge, Derbyshire, United Kingdom to Rosemary Leah Wheeler *née* Wizst and Jonathan 'Jack' Philip Wheeler. No siblings. Early education: Henge Church of England Primary School, Matlock All Saints Secondary School. Demonstrated great musical acuity from an early age. By age sixteen had begun to be recognised as one of the most gifted classical violinists of his generation. Attended the Royal College of—

Wheeler skips three pages.

> —after sustaining a minor injury while on tour in □□□□□□□□, he encountered SCP-4051, which had infested a wing of the hospital where he received treatment. SCP-4051 was protected by an unusual form of antimemetic camouflage to which Wheeler — like an estimated 1 in 145,000 individuals worldwide — was (and remains) immune. His attempt to alert authorities to the infestation's presence was intercepted by a Foundation listening station. Operative Marion A. Hutchinson (100A-1-9331), then a field agent based in—

Another page.

> —resistant to conventional memory-erasure procedures. Hutchinson applied successfully for an exemption, arguing that even with his memories left intact it would be impossible for Wheeler to share the details of SCP-4051. They subsequently became romantically involved.

"Oh, they 'subsequently became romantically involved', did they? Tell me more, you featureless gray sphere of a biographer, I'm *hooked* now."

The biography is contentless beyond this point. Adam Wheeler's life spent touring, playing, lecturing and occasionally conducting, writing and composing is documented in exhaustive, pointless detail. He withstands background checks and surveillance, and consistently demonstrates himself to represent zero risk of leak. He eventually receives the extremely low clearance level normally granted to long-term Foundation-external partners of Foundationers. They get married. She takes his name, which she, reading, considers faintly unrealistic. Blah blah.

There is nothing about his personality. Nothing about their relationship. No content.

She remembers acquiring SCP-4051. There was no one there. She remembers nothing.

*

Up until the end of the third round of questioning, Adam Wheeler assumes good faith. He figures the repetition is a due diligence tic, a corporate procedural requirement. It's only when they start over from "What's your name?" with a brand new interviewer for the fourth time that he finally gets it: they don't like him, and they don't care what he thinks his name is. They're trying to grind him down, until he can't think, until he's just dust particles they can sift through for data.

He reacts badly to this realisation. He asks for his wife, and asks for his wife, and they ignore him, and they ignore him, and she persistently fails to appear, until it becomes a cold form of torture.

The questions keep coming and nothing stops them, not answering truthfully, not not answering, not lying, not rambling off on tangents. They don't stop until he begins falling asleep in the middle of his own sentences.

He wakes up in a standard Humanoid Containment Unit, a stackable one-bedroom apartment with holographic fake windows, impregnable walls and extensive discreet modifications for the security and monitoring of anomalous entities. This one is on the first basement level, but he can't tell that. The bright quote-light-unquote pouring in through the main living area window is authentic enough to tan.

He wakes up on the couch, with a start, feeling creaky and dehydrated. He realises that he slept in his suit, and that his suit is creased. He hates that, that sensation of not looking his best, or at least presentable. That's going to gnaw away at him until he can find, at minimum, a razor and a change of shirt.

What woke him was the heavy metallic *clack* of the door unlocking. He looks up, rubbing his eyes. It's his wife. "Marion! Oh, my God." He leaps up and rushes over to meet her. She stops him a few paces short, with a gesture and a cold smile. And *that* hurts. It hurts more than anything.

So it really happened: SCP-4987 has bitten out the part of Marion Wheeler which cared about him. She wasn't absent because of some unrelated K-class outbreak. She just chose to be elsewhere, indifferent.

So he doesn't embrace her. He stands at a polite distance. "How are you feeling? Did you sleep?"

"I'm fine."

"I can tell you've had your coffee. Have you eaten? Come on, I'll make you something." The unit has a rudimentary kitchen area. He goes through and starts exploring the cupboards. "There must be something edible around here. Eggs and milk, at least. I'm ashamed to say I more or less fell asleep where I was standing when they put me in here, so I haven't had a chance to scout. Or do you keep the place empty, and the food arrives through a slot in the wall?"

Marion begins, "Mr. Wheeler—"

Adam shoots her a disappointed look.

"Okay," she says, "Adam. Please come and sit down. You're right,

there's nothing in any of those cupboards."

He closes the cupboard and sits opposite her at the kitchen table. "Scrambled eggs on granary toast," he suggests. "With a lot of garlic in the eggs. That's what we both need right now. Particularly you, because if I don't make something substantial for you you end up drinking those wretched wallpaper paste milkshakes seven days a week. Or you skip the meal entirely."

"Adam. We've been married for seventeen years, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"I don't know you."

"That's fine," Adam says. "I doubt that that's going to be a serious problem. You've told me, many times, about your own people who've lost themselves in the work and had to bootstrap their own personalities a second time. You love watching it. It's like watching butterflies emerge from chrysalides. The best of your people can turn that around in ten weeks. Imagine how fast it's going to be for you."

"No," Wheeler replies. Her tone is clinical, matter-of-fact. "I'm afraid it's not possible."

"What's not possible?"

"I can't begin a new relationship right now. Certainly not something as serious as a marriage. You have nominal clearance; you know what we do. I have responsibilities. I do not have... 'time'."

"This isn't 'new'," Adam says, deadpan. "It's pre-existing."

"No," Wheeler explains. "That relationship is ended now, and we are somewhere else."

Adam stares at her for a long moment, thin-lipped and far from happy. He asks her:

"What do you remember?"

The question is so open-ended that Wheeler doesn't manage to respond verbally. She spreads her hands slightly, the gesture saying, "What?"

"You don't remember me," Adam says. "SCP-4987 also clearly ate the part of you which would care if you forgot me. And, additionally, the

part of you which cares about brunch. 'What else have you forgotten?' would be a stupid question to ask, so instead I'm asking you, what's left? I want you to tell me everything you can remember."

"*Everything* I can remember?"

"Yes. From 1995 to right now."

It's still a farcical question at face value, and Wheeler's first instinct is to dismiss it as such, but she thinks again. She thinks, intending to genuinely try to answer the question. And she finds gaps. There's a dearth of specifics. It's like being asked to "say something" and immediately forgetting *all words*.

She says, "I remember... working."

And driving home, and then sleep, and then driving back to work. Big, hostile buildings. Drug regimens, containment procedures, endless piles of opaque numbers, personal fitness drills. Running. Calculating. Never, ever stopping calculating. She remembers, with unfair clarity, a large variety of extremely bad dreams.

And other than that, nothing. A huge, deep, ragged-edged black pit.

Adam says, "You remember nothing good, do you? Nothing good at all.

"When you come home, on the nights you make it home, you are ready to fold up. It has never been an easy job, but these past few years have been the worst they've ever been, because you're coming to the conclusion of something gigantic. You have explained to me how it is that you can never tell me, *really*, what it is that you do, without the act of you telling me killing me. And I — I couldn't stand that at first, and I still hate your job and I think it's a monstrous farce — but I trusted you in that. And I stopped asking. But I can tell, from the... rattle in your hands and the things you don't say, and the way you sleep, that there is some kind of war going on back here. And you're losing people to it. And you're almost at the end. And you're going to win.

"So I scramble your eggs, and I play the violin for you, and between us we hack out about three-tenths of what I would consider to be normalcy. Not because you can't do this without me, you could take the whole universe by yourself if you *really* had to, but: to blazes with that, you don't have to.

"It didn't happen instantly. But it happened pretty damned fast. We had music in common at first, Bach and Mendelssohn. We had tobacco in common and a mutual hatred of *The X-Files*. Then it was coffee and wine. And then after some time it became hiking, and birdwatching, and Perseid meteors. We like Bruce Lee flicks. We watch *Law & Order* and *Jeopardy!* and we read stacks and stacks of books. No, in fairness, it's mainly me for the books. You don't have the long-term time to spare anymore."

He pinches the bridge of his nose for a second. Any two people can find that much common ground. Just being in the same place for years doesn't count for anything. What do they *have*?

"We communicate," he says. "Better than anybody I've seen. We can be apart for two months while I'm on tour or you're overseas and snap right back and pick up a conversation from the word we left off. We are connected. We are in the same headspace. You'll see it all. It'll happen again, just as fast. You've just got to give it a chance."

Wheeler is almost there. She sees the shape of what Adam is describing. It's distant and unclear, but if she concentrates she might be able to bring it into focus. It worries her, for nebulous reasons she can't completely articulate, but she can almost understand how there could be room for it. How it could lock into her life as it currently exists, and still make sense.

But Adam just said something crucial. He said a keyword which means the marriage counselling session is over and this is now a situation. Wheeler can't ignore it. She forces herself to drop the other thread and seize this one.

"What war?"

And now Adam really doesn't know what's happening. "Good God. The war, Marion. I don't know how else to describe it."

"What war? How many people?"

"I don't know," Adam says. "There are names. Names you stop mentioning, and then you ignore me when I bring them up again. I assume there are reasons. I don't know the specifics. How could I know? Why don't you know?"

Wheeler races through the reasoning. The existence of a war computes. It confirms long-term existing suspicions. It could have been going on for years without her realising it. It makes sense to her

that she could be fighting it, winning, even, and not know; managing her own memories or losing them in skirmishes. This certainly won't be the first time she's uncovered it. It makes sense that Adam, naturally gifted with the mental equivalent of a thick layer of blubber, could stand on the edge of the conflict and dimly be able to perceive it. And the Division — so understaffed.

People are disappearing around her.

"And what if—" she begins, and stops dead in the middle of the thought, as if the thought itself was stolen out of her.

"And what if we get back together, and—" she begins again, and this time hard instinct seizes her around the midsection and bodily hauls her back from thinking a thought which, *it* knows, would kill her. She's Wile E. Coyote, she's already run off the edge of a precipice into clear air, and thinking that thought would be like looking down.

She feels SCP-4987 moving around her, abstractly bound to her, a winking speck of glitter in her eye. "Something's wrong."

Adam scratches at his own eye. "Do you see that?"

"How can *you* see that?"

"I have a mild immunity to antimemetic influence," Adam says. He knows it's in his file and he knows Wheeler has read the file, but apparently it needs to be said again. "I can tell when something is fritzing with my memories. I can resist it. Up to a point. So, Marion, I was hoping to have a relaxed conversation over coffee and get around to this topic organically, but I'm going to have to skip to the end: I have the impression that SCP-4987 is trying to kill me."

"...No," Wheeler says. "That's not its behavior model. It doesn't sustain itself that way, by eating people. It eats *memories*. And it's never done *this*. Not to you, nor me, nor anybody. Not since the very early days. It's *tame*. It does exactly what I tell it to do. Even when I'm waiting, and I'm bored, and I let it eat my short-term, it sits and *waits* to be told to eat."

"Then what is it doing to us?" Adam is getting nervy, and won't let go of his eye. He stands up and backs away. "I would like it if we could figure this out quickly. We don't have a way to put SCP-4987 down."

There's a sound in Wheeler's mind, but not in her ear, like a distant chorus of baying dogs. She stands too, and moves after Adam into the

middle of the containment unit.

She says, "It's trying to protect you."

"I— How does wiping your memory of me protect me?"

"I can't explain," Wheeler says. "And I can't explain why I can't explain. I don't fully know myself. There's an [redacted]."

"A *what*?"

"You can't be here," she says. "You can't be in my life. You have to leave, or you're going to die."

"I'm not leaving you," Adam says. "Christ, that's why we did it in the end. Got married, I mean. It was scintillatingly obvious to both of us, very early on, that we were forever. But I wanted to get it on the public record. I stood up in front of everybody I respect and I swore to *them* that I would protect you. Forever!"

SCP-4987 is agitated. Wheeler feels it flitting around the room, incoherent, trying to tell her what it needs.

She says, with sudden actinic clarity, "I must have made an identical promise."

Adam doubles over, blinded in both eyes now. Closing his eyes does nothing, covering his eyes does nothing. The gold-white light is strobing for him, moving into violet. He panics. "Help. Help me. I can't see." He reaches out, unsteadily, for Wheeler's hand. She lets him take it and pull her close. The light doesn't fade. He clings to Wheeler for a few moments, and she holds on to him until he realises that SCP-4987 is completely within her control, and this is all intentional.

"You're going to do this?" Adam says. "This is the Foundation mandate, this is what your definition of 'protect' amounts to? You've got no idea what you're about to do to yourself. You don't even know me."

"I think I know," she replies.

"You will feel this for the rest of your life. Every day, you will wake up with a sick cold feeling in your stomach where there used to be a real life. And you'll wonder why."

"I'm going to win this war," Wheeler says to him. "I'll beat the universe. And then I will come and find out why."

Adam holds on to her for another long, long moment. He can hear the baying too, now, and he can even barely perceive what it is, far off behind the hill, that SCP-4987 is frantic about. That distant dot, that fleeting second-hand glimpse of the shape of it, far off, is enough to terrify him.

He has faith. He knows how fast Marion can put the jigsaw pieces back together, work against a universe which makes no sense to her, isolate the truth. He knows she can take the universe. But a sharp misgiving jabs him in the stomach and he can't stop himself saying: "And what if you lose?"

She kisses him. It's a stranger's kiss, there's nothing there Adam recognises. He breaks off, unsettled. It's a whisper now: "What if you lose?"

*

Wheeler exits the containment unit; she slams and deadlocks the door with a single movement. The heavy metallic *crack* makes the whole building shake.

There are people outside. Gauss, Julie Still and a few others, comparing notes. They look appalled.

"Fill in his backstory," she tells them. "He was never married. Relocate him to where I'll never find him, incinerate all the evidence, then report to me for surgical memory erasure. I'll do myself last."

Gauss looks as if he has an objection. She stares him down.

"My husband's dead," she says.

Fresh Hell

There's another conglomeration of severed fingers in the last room, coating the room's interior like the innards of an exploded elephant. Parts of the sprawl are feeling their way, like mould, into a medical cabinet and the rest is splayed over a foetal shape on a medical gurney. The mass reacts sharply to the new light as Wheeler opens the door, rearing up and angling parts of itself toward him. Wheeler reels backwards and pulls the door to just in time; there is a heavy, fleshy *thump* as the mass hits the door from the far side. The door holds.

Wheeler trips on his own foot and slumps against the far wall. The shape on the gurney was a coiled-up human. Not a corpse, but a living human with one wide-open eye whose whole body was being slowly consumed and processed into more fingers. They were growing out of his throat. Wheeler didn't see this. He thinks he saw it, but he knows he couldn't have.

And that's it. Wheeler casts around the corridor. Every other door he's tried is blocked or locked. The place is below ground, so no windows. No navigable ventilation.

There are two more gunshots up at the far end of the corridor, ear-splitting in the enclosed space and echoing for many seconds. Hutchinson rounds the corner at a dead run, gun in hand, and reaches him quickly. "Find a way out?" she asks, pointlessly. She can read Wheeler's expression. He's found nothing good.

"This place is infested," Wheeler says. "Every room, all the stairwells... This is absurd."

At the far end of the corridor, the main mass heaves itself around the corner. From this distance, it looks like an ambulatory eight-tonne pile of mouldy mashed potato and fat, wiggling maggots. There are toes in there as well as fingers, and small teeth, and bits of bone. It has twenty bullet holes in it, and blood is flowing from all of them, but if it has vital organs they must be elsewhere in the building because none of the wounds have slowed it down or otherwise altered its slow, methodical homing behaviour. It smells powerfully and creatively disgusting, like concentrated medical waste.

It lurches forward in intermittent phases, coating the walls and floor

with scarlet ooze as it moves. It'll be on them in about half a minute, squashing them against the end of the corridor and then pulling them into the mess to be remade.

"I think we're done," Wheeler quavers. "Thanks for trying."

Hutchinson, for her part, just stands there, gun lowered, watching the thing come. It moves slowly, like a steam roller. It fills the corridor almost to the ceiling.

She has two bullets left and she's considering where to spend them. Shooting the mass itself is like shooting pudding. She'd kill for a grenade. Even a fire axe would be something. She might not be able to stop the thing, but she could at least make herself known with a fire axe. She could make it feel some *regret*.

"There are worse fates, I guess," Wheeler goes on, finding himself unable to stop talking, "than being digitised by that thing, but not all that many."

Hutchinson glances in his direction, apparently paying him direct attention for the first time since they met, sixty crowded minutes ago. She says, "Riser cupboard."

"What?"

She pushes Wheeler aside. There's a white-painted wall behind him. There's a lock in it, and a long vertical seam. She spends a moment choosing the right part of the lock to shoot, and shoots it out. Behind the tall, wide panel which opens is a shallow, dusty, metal-edged space like an elevator shaft with no elevator, allowing filthy pipes and cables to pass vertically between floors. She looks up. There's just enough room to admit a person.

"Can you climb?" she asks Wheeler. Without waiting for a response, she sheds her suit jacket, sticks a flashlight between her teeth and hauls herself up into the darkness. After a brief moment of scuffling, there's another gunshot. The other riser cupboard door.

"No," Wheeler finally manages. "No, I can't climb!" The mass is almost on him. He's transfixed by its motion, its all-too-familiar grasping behaviour.

"I figured," Hutchinson calls down. A hand descends, a human one with the conventional number of fingers. "It's clear up here. Come on, I'm braced. Mind this lip here, it's metal. Come on!"

Wheeler keeps his own jacket on and buttoned; it's the only part of the situation over which he still has firm control. He has to jump to catch hold of Hutchinson's hand, and just as he jumps, the main mass lunges for him, crossing the last few metres in a rush and catching hold of him by one foot.

He sees himself die.

His sweating hand immediately starts to slip out of Hutchinson's. She braces her other arm and hauls him up fifteen or thirty centimetres with an angry grunt, then releases his hand for a split second and reaches down like a flash to take firmer hold of his wrist. She keeps pulling. The mass closes around Wheeler's foot like aggressive, proactive quicksand. He yelps and kicks at it with his other foot until it finally pries his shoe loose. The mass retreats for a second, taking a crucial moment to realise that its prize is not living flesh, but by that time Hutchinson has hauled Wheeler up another half-metre and Wheeler has started pushing himself upwards off the pipework with his feet. The mass lunges again, but falls short, and seems too unintelligent to climb after them. It sloshes around, probing its surroundings, perplexed by the shoe.

Hutchinson hauls Wheeler over the lip into the next corridor. He scrapes his ribs badly and arrives crawling, eyes watering. He doesn't die. He can still see himself dying. He stays on all fours for a significant amount of time, processing what just happened.

"*Fuck!*"

Hutchinson is already standing, and apparently not even significantly exerted. "We need to get to the roof. I might be able to get a signal out from there."

"You're at the gym pretty often?" Wheeler pants, sitting back. "You train for fresh hell like this?"

"Yeah."

"That's great," Wheeler says, "because I play the *violin*. It's not quite as physically demanding. As careers go, I mean. When you said you were a county health inspector, that was an enormous lie, wasn't it?"

Hutchinson ignores the question, out of habit, and waits impassively for the man to cool.

"This is asinine," Wheeler declares. "This is brain damage." His skin

crawls, and grotesque visions flood through his brain. Eventually he recovers his breath and gets to his feet. He stands lopsided, so he takes his other shoe off and throws it back down the riser for symmetry.

"We need to get to the roof," Hutchinson says again.

Wheeler blinks a long blink, then focuses on something around the corner, something on the wall which Hutchinson can't see from where she's standing. "Yeah. One second." He goes to it — it's a red panel — and pulls something down. "Here, you were having no luck with the gun. Try this."

It's a fire axe.

*

He stepped on a rusty nail backstage after the show, and came to the emergency room for a tetanus injection. While waiting, he slowly realised that more than half of the people waiting with him were clutching partially or entirely severed fingers. Bandsaw accidents; hands caught in car doors; hands trapped in door hinges; hands crushed in machinery; every one of them unrelated. There was an epidemic of physical injury, which should have been impossible, and when he tried to bring it up with the medical staff they didn't seem to understand what he was saying.

And then he saw one of the fingers escape. He followed it as it wriggled away down a long corridor to a far corner of the hospital, to an ajar door which nobody in the hospital seemed to be able to perceive except for him, and into a different building where there were no people at all, just hundreds and hundreds of wriggling, exploring, slowly reproducing and lengthening fingers.

He slammed the door and tried and failed to get someone, anyone, staff or patient, to see what he was seeing. He found a payphone and dialled for emergency services and ordered off the menu, asking for emergency industrial-scale pest control or hazardous containment or psychic support or *something*.

And there was a long pause, and he was connected to what was either a very measured, dispassionate human or an impressively articulate robot operator. It told him to wait by the phone; an associate would

be with him shortly. Marion Hutchinson arrived in person, slightly less than fifteen minutes later.

He showed her the door. They went a few paces inside, Hutchinson crouching and aiming some kind of flashlight/scanner at the finger worms. Behind them, something reached out and gently pushed the door closed with a *click*. They turned, and saw what it was, and ran.

*

Hutchinson hacks her way through the last of the flesh-clogged stairwell. They're almost at the roof. This part of the distributed infestation doesn't seem to be mobile, although it is freakishly grabby.

Wheeler stands three paces back from her, partly to avoid the backswing but mostly so he doesn't have to watch. It's butchery, and it's grisly, and Hutchinson barely seems perturbed by it; she slices methodically until there are waterfalls of gore coming down the stairs and soaking her shoes and his socks, and she does it with the manner of someone trimming a hedgerow.

Whunch. Krunlch.

Wheeler is shivering, and starting to crash. If he doesn't stay still right in the middle of the stairwell, the remaining fingers tug at his hair and sleeves. In another few minutes it may finally dawn on him that this is really happening. "This is crazy, this is nuts," he says to himself, over and over.

"What was that word you used back there?" Hutchinson asks, suddenly.

"Mmm?"

Whunch. "Don't tune out. When the mass was coming down the hall. Did you say 'digitized'?"

"...Um." Wheeler seems to change gear, and wake up. "Yeah. Uh, but, in the old sense of the word—"

"'Digit' meaning 'finger', so 'digitized' meaning 'turned into fingers'. I just got it." She's smiling, he can tell from the sound of her words. *Chlunk.* "That's great."

"It is?"

"What kind of violin music?"

"Uh. What kind would you like? Tonight's— last night's— Christ, *yesterday*'s concert was Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 1. And a few other pieces, of course, but that was the main course for me. That was where I got my teeth in."

Hutchinson stops hacking and turns around. She actually looks him in the eye. "That piece is a nightmare."

"It's a challenge," Wheeler admits, brightly.

"No, I mean it's chaotic. It's unlistenable."

"I can play anything you like," Wheeler states.

Hutchinson appears to spend a moment considering this possibility. "Bach. You can play some Bach?"

"Just get me to a violin."

Hutchinson thinks for a moment longer. She smiles and nods, and goes back to hacking.

*

And they hit the roof, and Hutchinson's radio finally works, and she calls everything in. She speaks in rapid keywords which Wheeler can't quite follow, although he can pick out his own name and "hazmat" and a repeated word which sounds to him like a brand of cassette tape: "Memetix".

It's very nearly dawn. This wing of the hospital is a few storeys shorter than its main body, so rows of bright-lit wards look down over the roof, while the roof looks out over two sprawling car parks and then greenery and roads and a faint, dull red where the Sun is due to come up. Hutchinson quickly ascertains that there is no fire escape from here; the intended fire exit from the roof is the stairwell up which they just came, so they'll have to wait for a helicopter. Or, more likely and less romantically, a long ladder.

"Backup is coming," Hutchinson concludes. "They have to come in from the next city over, so it could be a few hours. They'll have decontamination gear, antibiotics, blankets, tedious debriefing forms, you name it. But most importantly, coffee."

Wheeler makes an inarticulate sound, the sound of one who could use the coffee, and after that, a drink. "God, I have another concert *today*," he says. He sits on the thick perimeter wall, rubs his eyes, rubs his sore feet, and begins to shut down.

"You'll be there," Hutchinson says. "The nasty part is over. You did well for a civilian. I've seen far worse."

"Worse than this?"

Hutchinson says nothing.

"I'm sorry." Wheeler opens his eyes again. He gestures at the mayhem from which they just escaped, the fire door and everything it leads to. It's all still down there. "You've seen worse than *this*?"

Hutchinson, again, says nothing.

"What is this? What happened here?"

At first Hutchinson doesn't answer this either. She walks away across the roof and spends an entire minute staring at the forthcoming Sun.

And then, surprising Wheeler and slightly surprising even herself, she walks back to him and says:

"SCP-4051, which is the number we just assigned to this infestation, has an intrinsic property which makes it nearly impossible for sapient organisms to perceive it. It's a form of camouflage. It's not invisible, it's a mental blocking effect. Information about it goes nowhere, it gets suppressed. People walk past this building every day of the week. They don't see what's blocking the windows. They walk past that door and don't realise it's standing open. It could have been here for decades. The researchers will get the whole story eventually."

Wheeler finds in this explanation something he halfway understands. "So... living fnords?"

And this actually slows Hutchinson down for a second. She gets that reference. She read those books when she was younger, years ago, before joining the Foundation. But she's *never* made the connection

between fnords and the work she does. For as long as she's been working there, she hasn't even thought about it. The irony is intense enough to burn.

"Yeah," she says.

"Except that you can see them," Wheeler says.

"I have specialist training," Hutchinson says, declining to mention her drug regimen.

"And I, also, can see them."

"You seem to have a mild natural immunity to memory-clouding phenomena," Hutchinson explains. "It's rare, but it happens. At a hospital this busy, someone like you was bound to stumble into this place sooner or later." *And escape alive,* she privately adds. "But the point is... this infestation, SCP-4051, is a snowflake. I don't mean that it's special and unique. I mean: it's part of a *blizzard*.

"I work for an independent scientific research institution with a specialist focus on the containment of hazardous anomalous phenomena. We have an international mandate and formidable resources and... unimaginable responsibilities. We... we watch the blizzard. And we guard the little fire. We're called the Foundation."

Wheeler's full attention is on her now. He feels tense and exposed here, vulnerable to extraordinary natural forces from which by rights he should be fleeing. But he's also fascinated. Hutchinson has a faintly ethereal attitude to her. It's as if she's not standing on the same planet as everybody else.

"So you're not FBI," he says. "Either, I mean. That was my other guess."

Hutchinson wrinkles her nose. "I hate that show."

"I don't believe I mentioned a show," Wheeler says mischievously.

"They do *everything* wrong," Hutchinson says. A nerve has been touched. She shuffles irately. "They don't have enough people; they don't trust each other. They don't spend nearly enough time on paperwork. Paperwork saves lives. But most of all? I hate the will-they-or-won't-they. For what, five years? It's forced, it's farcical." She glares at Wheeler. "It doesn't take that long to know. You will or you won't. And then you do."

Wheeler reads her expression carefully. "You do?"

"Yeah," Hutchinson says, smiling again. "Yeah, I think you do."

A distant rapid thudding noise slowly becomes apparent. Hutchinson sees the source of the sound first and points. "Backup's here. And it looks like we rated a helicopter after all."

Ojai

Foundation Agent George Barsin is monolithic: nearly two metres tall and rectangular-shouldered, like a Bruce Timm cartoon. He is bald, bearded, and immaculately presented. His suit is tailored; there are few which will fit him off the rack.

He arrives at the Green place first thing after dawn, six o'clock. The address is isolated, an acre or two of ill-maintained scrubland off a spur of a spur of the main highway north out of Ojai.

Barsin is part of the Foundation's Anomalous Religious Expressions Division. They do cults.

"Green" is not the name of the cult which Barsin is here to confront, but a codename. Barsin doesn't know the real name. At the briefing last night, it was explained that there are legitimate security reasons to use codenames instead of true names here, but those reasons were not explained. Barsin, no fool, took this to mean that there is some form of cognitohazard surrounding the true names. Or a memory-clouding phenomenon which makes them impossible to record. Or — and he's dealt with Foundation research staff for far too many years to not consider this — somebody just straight-up forgot to record the real names, and is trying to cover for themselves.

If there's an SCP number, he hasn't been told it.

*

The house is an ugly white sprawl. One storey, wood construction, no two windows alike in design... decaying. There are piles of junk, lumber, rusted vehicle components, drums of filthy green water. Willow and sycamore trees are encroaching from two-and-a-half sides, drizzling leaves and seeds and miscellaneous biological gunk all over the roof, clogging the gutters. Through the windows, only closed curtains and blinds are visible. The front door is standing ajar.

Barsin proceeds inside, cautiously. The entrance opens almost directly onto a large lounge/diner/kitchen area. The room is darkened, light

mostly spilling from the entrance door — Barsin leaves it open — and feeling its way around the edges of the window coverings. The place is dirty, and smells of mould. The still air is like an oven, and it's extremely quiet except for the faint, animated sound of someone talking, away down the hall, words not entirely clear.

"—wasps and, yeah, it's going to be sharp inside. When you're made to move, that's tloi kwrlu dlth you'll bleed from—"

Barsin goes down the hall, passing a wall decoration which was once a mirror but has been completely painted over in black.

After a brief search, during which he ascertains that the rest of the house is empty, he comes to the final room. This door is closed, but the focused rambling is coming from inside:

"—at home, it's super easy. I'm going to give you something. An easy two-part project for you to take away, and don't forget alth amnth below. Part one: find someone weaker than you—"

Barsin knocks, loudly, twice.

The patter stops. Nothing else is heard. Barsin opens the door.

The room is dark, its window blocked with a thick curtain. There's a computer desk in the corner opposite the door, about as cluttered as a desk can realistically get, strewn with partially disassembled hardware, USB keys, chocolate wrappers, scraps of paper, ballpoint pens. There's a gaming mouse, unable to move for junk. There's a good-quality video camera setup, a monitor, video feeds on the monitor, dust.

There's a cheap, skeletal swivel chair in front of the monitor and a young man of about twenty slouched uncomfortably in the chair. He is skinny, with discoloured, pale skin which Barsin thinks could be caused by malnutrition. He has what was at one point a stylish, fashionable haircut but is now in some disrepair, and when he turns around Barsin sees that he has dark rings around his eyes. It looks as if he hasn't slept in a year. He reeks. The room is filled with that odour, almost thick enough to see.

In the same way that the anomalous viral/religious phenomenon — the cult, gathering around and above this young man like an anvil cloud — is named "Green", he himself is named "Red".

"Good morning," Barsin says. "We saw your streams."

The youth pulls his headphones down. "The fuck are you?"

"My name's George Barsin. I'm part of an organisation which— ah—"

Red launches out of his chair like a rabid greyhound from a cage. He comes fist-first, losing the headphones. Barsin shifts his weight slightly to his left, leaning away from the punch. He catches Red's arm and pulls it forward, violently, deflecting the attack's momentum and bringing the youth teeth-first into the door frame. Red stumbles back, crouching. He finds his footing swiftly. Froth is developing at the corners of his mouth, mixing with blood. Scrabbling around the junk on the floor, he puts his hand on a soldering iron.

As Red comes forward again, Barsin wastes a critical split second trying to trace the iron's cable, to figure out whether it's plugged in and hot or not. It's not, but that's enough distraction that Red gets right up there, driving the iron up into Barsin's gut with both hands. There's an electronic screech and a spark of orange light; the iron holes Barsin's shirt but skitters off his abdomen, opening a long tear. There's bare skin underneath. His shield is invisible, partly mythical, and protects his seemingly exposed head just as well as the rest of him.

Barsin takes Red in a headlock. Some haphazard kicking ensues, less well-choreographed. Red has a demon's energy behind him but Barsin has, to be blunt, arrived prepared. In a few more moves, Red is disarmed, stunned, flat on his back and good for nothing.

Barsin takes stock. The number of genuine, fight-for-your-life fights he's been in is still in single digits. This one ranks about in the middle. Fifteen seconds of activity; both of them made mistakes. A learning experience.

"Then I'll dispense with the introductions," he says to Red. "The live streaming vector was novel. We hadn't seen that before. Very effective compared to the generic self-help-book-and-walled-compound model. You get one point for originality, out of ten. But we predicted it decades back and we had the containment procedures ready to go. We have people at the streaming services. As I speak, we're locking you out of your account. We're using your own channels to distribute inoculation codes."

Barsin tries to tidy his shirt up. It's not going to work. Never mind.

"But you're the source," he says. "A simple inoculation code would glance off. Physical intervention is required." He reaches inside his

jacket — where he has a perfectly serviceable gun, which he elected to leave where it is for this confrontation — and produces a device not unlike an ophthalmologist's scope. He kneels, lifts Red's right eyelid and aims the scope at it, projecting a brilliant white spot of light which bathes the entire eye and causes it to lock open. Almost all of Red's musculature locks up as well, effectively pinning him to the floor. His teeth clench.

Barsin says to Red, "This man is innocent. Nobody can deserve what you've done to him. Release him and leave this reality forever."

Through gritted teeth, Red says, "Who. The fuck. Are you?"

"Alright." Barsin pushes another button, changing the projected light pattern from a pure white disc into a complex spiral star design in red and blue. There's a *crack* like ribs being forced apart. And the youth screams. It doesn't sound like Red. It's a full-body scream, anguished and hopeless and as loud as he's physically able to make it. It comes up from his belly and goes on, flat out, until he runs out of breath and gasps and does it again, arching his back and clawing at the floor. After the second full breath he cools down to a sobbing wail.

"Jesus Christ, don't send me back. Please."

"I won't. It's okay."

"Don't send me back. I can't see. Who's there?"

"It's okay. You'll get your sight back. My name's George. What's yours?"

"There's a pit," the youth says, choking, "and it always gets worse. It doesn't stop. There's no bottom." He babbles incoherently for a moment, and then trails off. His eyes dance, blindly.

"You're in a really bad place right now," Barsin says.

The youth vehemently agrees.

"Something has gone wrong," Barsin explains. "And that thing, that horrific *thing which went wrong*, has found you and abducted you and replaced you. It's out here now, using your skin as a finger puppet, walking you around, making you talk. Replicating. That nightmare you're having is being had by a hundred thousand people right now. That's the bad news. The good news is that we caught you. And I can still see you in there. And there's good chance that we can get you

out."

"A 'good chance'?" The youth breathes twice. "If you can't—" he begins urgently.

"Focus on the red and blue spiral," Barsin says. He still has the scope pointed into the youth's eye.

"What? I can't see anything."

"That's because you're not directly connected to this optic nerve anymore. But your mind is locked inside something which is. You can't see the spiral, but somehow you know what it looks like. You can sense its shape, like a pattern of heat on the back of your hand." Barsin's voice is becoming slower, taking on a hypnotic rhythm. "The spiral idea is going in. It's spreading and flourishing. Occupying more space. The more you think about the spiral, the more you realise you can't think about anything but the spiral."

The youth seems to have nothing to say to this. His breathing stabilises.

"Your thoughts are slowed," Barsin continues. "The spirals fill you up, recursively, like ice crystals, until you can't move. Your brain knows it's being poisoned. Even though you're blind, you feel a reflexive need to look away or block out what you're seeing. A long enough exposure is fatal."

There is a long, heavy pause, during which Barsin does nothing but shine poisonous light into the young man's eye, while studying that brightly illuminated eye himself, tracking the progress of the ocular response, waiting for a particular tell. It's not a clear-cut thing; there's a small amount of guesswork. He waits until he's sure. Finally, he releases the button on the scope, shutting it off.

The youth is now completely inert.

*

Barsin stands up, knees creaking. He relaxes, sighs. His shoulders untense a little. He puts the scope away.

"You can think of this as memetic chemotherapy," he says. He says it

to himself, mostly, to fill dead air. The young man can only hear pink fuzz now. "The spiral symbol is an elementary cognitopoison. A long exposure is fatal. But a just barely non-fatal exposure is recoverable. You will recover from this poison, and Red cannot. You will survive and Red will die. Because you, my man, are an intelligent, creative human being, and Red is..."

He reflects on his briefing, and what he knows of the Green phenomenon, and the hundred thousand people suffering and raving inside it right now. They are in all parts of the globe. He has seen some photographs of what takes place in homes occupied by Red's appalling messages. He's heard a strictly limited amount of highly redacted audio.

Dispassionate people make better field decisions, that's the rule he was always taught. But remaining dispassionate is harder on some days than others.

"...a piece of shit."

Barsin potters around the room for a little while, taking a closer look at some of the computer hardware. Nothing notable there, although he finds a stand for the soldering iron. There's also a narrow camp bed in the room, with a bedraggled sleeping bag. He clears the sleeping bag away and loads the youth onto the camp bed, in a recovery position. He pulls the curtain open. It's an obnoxiously sunny day, and the Sun is aimed right in through that window.

Finally, Barsin picks up the swivel chair and settles into it, on the far side of the room, where he can keep an eye on his patient. He pulls a Foundation-issued phone from his pocket, along with a horrendously tangled pair of cheap earbuds, which he begins to untangle.

He relaxes into his monologue. It's not as if anybody is listening.

"Fact is, I didn't need to come here. There's more than one way to physically intervene when something like Green comes around. You know what the original plan was when we found out about you? Orbital laser cannon to the top of the head. We can do that, my man. From time to time. Your house would be a circle of scorched timber with you a burnt marshmallow at the middle of it. That's our latest methodology for dealing with virulent, single-culpability memetic anomalies. We do it at arm's length, at the longest possible distance, unblinkingly and unfeelingly, and to hell with the details. It's brutal. Impersonal. Very expensive in orbital laser maintenance. We say to

ourselves that it's effective. Maybe it is. I'm not at that level. I don't get to see the statistics.

"But what I do know is that we can always do better. And I looked at the file and I looked at you, and... I took a long shot. Honestly, I'm a very small guy in the grand scheme, but I stood up in a pretty intense meeting with people who I don't really have the authority to say anything to and I said to them — this is a paraphrase — 'There's a completely innocent kid at the centre of this. He doesn't deserve this. At minimum, we've got to make the gesture.'"

A shadow passes across the room. Barsin looks around briefly, but whatever it is has gone. He thinks nothing of it.

"And then I also said, 'If it works, it'll save us a boatload of money.' I think that part was the part which got their attention. But I got the thumbs-up. So here I am. Trying to save your life the hard way instead of just atomizing it. It'll probably take all day. Six, ten hours. Don't worry. I have podcasts."

He finishes untangling the earbuds and screws the first of them into his left ear.

"Your people must really hate you," Red says.

Shit.

Barsin draws. Late. *Obviously* nobody should be able to talk right now, but the real reason he draws late is that the comment lands. It should just pass him by but there is a sharp, spiteful element of truth to it. Truthfully, nobody was a fan of the idea. Barsin has been saying for a long time, with gradually increasing volume, to gradually increasingly senior Foundation overseers, that a chat beats a fight. He's been ignored over and over. Yesterday, when they finally said that he could try it, it was grudgingly. And so a momentary flicker of foul suspicion appears— did they know? Did they really just— kill him?

They didn't. He knows, of course they didn't. But it's too late. As he fumbles the gun out, Red has already sat up, grinning like a ventriloquist's puppet, and turned his head to look right at Barsin. They make eye contact, and this time Red's eyes are open *all the way*, allowing Barsin to see straight through to what's on the other side. Green comprehension leaps out of the pit at Barsin and grounds itself in the back of his skull.

He recoils instinctively, breaking the connection and covering his

eyes. He stumbles, falling backwards out of the chair and into the corner of the room. His orange, crystalline shield fluctuates, panicking in its own way because of what just passed through it. Intermittently, it turns impermeable, cutting off Barsin's frantic breathing. Then it snaps off and dies.

Barsin doesn't have the training to fully comprehend the idea complex he was just exposed to. He has a basic level of practical memetics training; he can administer the spiral treatment and a few others, and protect himself from certain attacks which would knock a generic human over like a domino. But he's an entry-level practitioner, not a specialist, not a scientist. The sheer scope of Green is beyond his ability to comprehend. He feels like one of the men Louis Slotin irradiated, a Demon Core criticality witness. He knows he's dead. The only question is how long it's going to take.

Red swings his legs off the bed and stands, keeping his grin fixed on Barsin. "A spinning red and blue light. How *backward* are you?" He seems to grow larger, and to sink backwards into space, a hole where a human should be. Barsin finds he can't make himself move out of the corner. It's like he's pinned. There's a creeping, staticky numbness in his hands.

He understands his error now. He might as well have tried to poison the ocean. He sees the whole thing, Red's grotesque vision for the world, his/its immense, vicious *promise*. The rot is everywhere. Those hundred thousand infected are a foretaste. The spores are flourishing secretly in every aspect of reality: in people's lungs, in their minds, their words, in the soil, in the sky. Maggots and cancers and star signals. How can anyone think like that? How can anyone want that?

"You—" Barsin means it in the singular. There's no distinction between Red and whoever that original human was. There's no one to rescue. It was a damn ruse.

It was *voluntary*.

"You made this happen?" he manages. "It didn't abduct you. You invited it. Hacked your own soul in half and offered the pieces up, for no reason at all? You've latched yourself onto the front of something unimaginable. You can't comprehend how badly this is going to end. You've murdered yourself."

Red advances on him.

Gun. Barsin's mind is disintegrating. But it gets that one word out.

Gun.

It's on the floor between them, gleaming in the shaft of orange light pouring out of the window. Barsin fights himself and wins and lunges for it, only then finding that the creeping numbness in his extremities isn't just affecting his hands, it's affecting his own ability to perceive them. He doesn't know that it's a minor antimemetic clouding effect; all he knows is that there's a stump at the end of his arm. Both arms. The gun is inoperable. All he can do is push it around the floor. He shouts, miserably and helplessly. Red laughs, and doesn't even bother to kick it away.

"The Foundation will stop you," Barsin manages, like a mantra.

Red cocks his head, as if he knows the word "Foundation" from somewhere. "Are all of them as weak as you?" He concentrates.

Comprehension goes both ways. Barsin dimly understands what Red represents, which means Red, in turn, dimly understands what Barsin represents. Red perceives the power structures which dispatched Barsin into this hated burrow. Red perceives the shadows of the "people at the streaming services", and the Mobile Task Force Barsin doesn't know about, skulking out at the property's perimeter waiting for a go order which will never come. Red perceives the four or five "brutal", "impersonal" suits seated at the top of the operation, webbing it together. One of them is toying absently with their laser strike keystick, twirling it around the back of their thumb over and over, dropping it.

That's as far through headspace as Red can search, because that's the limit of the people who know about him, it, Red. That's the hit list.

A shadow blots the Sun out again, the same one as before, for longer this time. Red looks out through the window, giving it a curt nod, and it departs.

Barsin slumps to one side, dead up to the shoulders now. Conscious that any of these words could be his last, he says, "You think you're in control. But it's going to kill you too. We can get you out. You can help us contain it."

Red crouches, still grinning. "Look at me. *Look.*" Barsin looks. He doesn't have a choice. It hurts. Red makes sure he is being heard loudly and clearly: "No."

"Z...zayin. Three four six. Samekh shin," Barsin whispers.

Red blinks. "What?"

Something bleeps.

"Ae star," Barsin says. "Ae star."

"Shit." Red looks around, suddenly genuinely alarmed. The phone. He lost track of Barsin's phone. He finds it, beneath the bed. He snatches it up. There's a voice authentication interface, and authentication is nearly complete. "Stop. Cancel. Undo." Nothing happens. Wrong voice. He drops the phone, scrabbles for the gun.

"Zaelochi anaeora. Fire," Barsin says.

Red puts a bullet through the phone. And a second through Barsin's skull.

He looks up at the ceiling, waiting, still alarmed. And he waits.

But nothing else happens.

Immemorial

"Ms. Wheeler! Ms. Wheeler!"

Marion Wheeler has just finished a scheduled inspection of SCP-8473 and is about to go for a cigarette. Someone is running up to meet her outside SCP-8473's containment unit. Wheeler recognises her as Dr. Eli Moreno, a trainee field researcher who joined the Antimemetics Division only six months ago.

"Dr. Moreno. Can I help you with something?"

"Uhm." Moreno interlocks her fingers nervously. She is a full head taller than Wheeler and half her age, with scraggly hair and exceedingly thick glasses. She lacks experience. But she is very smart, and she is learning very fast. In another year, she'll be among the best people the Division has, or has ever had, and Wheeler is looking forward to that. Wheeler loves nothing more than competent people.

Still, as the pause lengthens, that day of competence seems to be in the future. "Dr. Moreno, I normally expect my people to get to the point a little quicker than this."

"There's— a stone in the forest behind the Site," Moreno blurts. "It's *monumental*. It's like a skyscraper, it blots out the Sun. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Yes."

"But I've never seen it before. I don't understand how it's possible that I never saw it. It casts a shadow across the whole Site. I mean— Was it always there?"

"Yes."

"Is this because—"

"—you took your first routine dose of ops-grade mnestics this morning, yes."

Moreno seems alarmed. "That's how it works? Something that big can just be right there and we don't see it?"

"Yeah." Wheeler checks her watch, and mentally moves some scheduled commitments around. *Extend this "smoke break" to the rest of the afternoon. Leave the scheduled inspection of SCP-3125 where it is. Review promotion cases after the gym instead of before. Evening meal... at this rate, never...*

Moreno, suffocating under the weight of follow-up questions, finally asks, "What is it?"

Wheeler gestures to her left, down the corridor, indicating that she is about to walk, and that Moreno should follow her. "I will show you."

*

In the database it's SCP-9429. Moreno hasn't read the entry; she doesn't have access.

The stone is a single, unbroken, 91-by-91-by-147-metre vertical cuboid of ancient, weathered, dark basalt. It sits at a very slight angle, leaning fractionally to the north. Its regular angles clearly mark it as a carved object, a human-made artifact. It rises out of the forest to the east of Site 41 and dominates, not to say obliterates, the views in that direction from the windows of the Site's main block. It is, by volume, massively bigger than the Site itself, even including its underground extents. It looms. It is absolutely unmissable. The idea that anyone could fail to notice it for any period of time is, Wheeler has to admit, more than a little unnerving.

Wheeler leads Moreno up the short forest track to the stone's perimeter, and then right, following its perimeter, in its shadow. It's a wet day, and rain is dripping from the very top edge of the cube as well as from the conifers which grow right up beside it. The rain makes a constant white hiss, deadening other sounds.

"There's a weak antimemetic clouding effect surrounding it," Wheeler explains as she picks her way along the track ahead of Moreno. "To most people it's effectively invisible. You've been up to the top of some of these other hills, I'm sure. You should have seen it clearly from up there, as well, but you looked straight past it. That's normal. There's a related effect which removes people's memories after they've visited the stone. That effect is much stronger. It'll cut right through your mnestic drug regimen, and mine."

"So we'll forget all about this?" Moreno asks.

Wheeler holds up a battered little notebook and a cheap blue ballpoint. Moreno understands; she is carrying a notebook and pen as well. Information suppression is a complicated spectrum. Sometimes a written note is the only thing which will make it out of a zone which suppresses memories, electronic data, radio signals and even audible sound. Alongside the mandatory Foundation-issue "brickphone", many Antimemetics Division operatives habitually carry some combination of an instant camera, a mechanical tape-driven dictaphone, a notebook, a walkie-talkie...

Not that Moreno was expecting to need anything today.

"Of course," Wheeler continues, "one side-effect of the clouding is that I don't exactly remember the way. I guess we could set up sign posts, but somehow it never gets done... not because of antimemetic effects, you understand, just plain laziness... ah, this looks like the way up."

They come to a passage in the side of the stone. In fact it is not a passage but a tremendously deep groove, cut all the way from the top of the cube to its base, a slot with a thin line of overcast sky visible overhead and steps leading up. Wheeler begins to climb and Moreno follows. They climb in silence for some minutes. Moreno stops a few times to write down a note or two, hunching over to shield her notebook from the drizzle. Then she hurries to catch up with Wheeler, who maintains a steady, indifferent pace.

Some time after Moreno has lost count of the steps, the stepped groove makes a ninety-degree turn to the left and continues to ascend. Wheeler stops here, above Moreno, and turns to quiz her.

"What do you have so far?"

"What is this place?" Moreno asks.

"You tell me."

"Uhm." Moreno hesitates for a moment, uncertain where this is going. She checks her notes. "Uhm, well. Geologically speaking, this stone is an alien. At first I thought there had been a mountain on this spot which was excavated into this shape by human hands. But the rock itself is wrong. It's different from the mountains and hills near here. You'd have to travel at least five hundred kilometers to find basalt like this. Which means it must have been excavated elsewhere, maybe carved there, and moved here."

Wheeler says nothing, but her demeanour seems to indicate that Moreno is on the right track.

"Which isn't possible," Moreno continues. "This is a single stone. Judging from its dimensions and density, it must mass north of three million tonnes. That's now, *after* carving. And that can't be done. Human civilization cannot move objects of this size. Not in a single piece. The technology doesn't exist."

"Correct."

"So how did it get here?"

"Good question."

Moreno waits. She doesn't have the answer to the question, so she waits for Wheeler to supply it.

But Wheeler does not. "What else?"

"...It's been engraved," Moreno says, indicating the walls of the stepped passage. "Using tools. And I noticed the exterior walls are the same. There's a lot of weathering, but here and there between the biological crud there's this very clear, regular pattern. Right here, see? Tiny vertical rectangles. Like a... block cursor on an old computer terminal."

"Or a tombstone in typography," Wheeler suggests.

Moreno blinks. "...Yes. It's a uniform pattern. Very detailed work, which would require quite good tools even by modern standards. I think this pattern is supposed to cover the entire exterior of the stone. And if that's the case, the blocks are so minuscule and the stone is so large that there must have originally been hundreds of millions of them."

"Correct," Wheeler says again. "Anything else?"

Moreno thinks for a minute. She stares up into the rain, reflecting on the atmosphere that the stone, or sculpture as she supposes it would be better described, projects. Loneliness, quiet, desolation, awe... intimidation. And some fear. Although, with that intimidating, fearful atmosphere, there's no sensation of danger. No threat.

"'We considered ourselves to be a powerful culture,'" she says aloud.

Wheeler hears this, but asks no follow-up question. Apparently satisfied, she turns and continues climbing the steps, and Moreno follows.

The passage makes several more turns, carving out an erratic, squared squiggle. Moreno takes no further notes. Her knees are about ready to explode by the time they reach the top.

They emerge, blinking at the light, on a wet, windswept, slightly slanted plateau. There are more of the tiny tombstone indentations underfoot. The edges of the cube are some distance away but they are not marked; the dark grey surface just ends at a straight line not far out, and the horizon itself is below it, not visible. This gives Moreno some vertigo, particularly since the surface tilts towards one corner, and the engraved basalt underfoot is slick, wet and getting wetter.

There is a small cluster of Foundation scientific equipment up here, chunky weatherproof units stacked up under a canopy. There's a table, with a rugged, beaten-up computer terminal, switched off. Further away is a diesel generator.

Wheeler ignores the equipment and paces away in a different direction, facing away from Moreno and out at the sky, playing with her cigarette lighter, although not actually lighting anything. The lighter is actually a tiny propane burner intended for lighting stoves, given to her by her mother before she died. Wheeler no longer remembers this.

Moreno waits for a while, arms folded for warmth, gradually getting wetter. She doesn't seek cover under the canopy, because Wheeler hasn't. She senses that something is about to happen. Wheeler is normally quite poised and difficult to read, but she looks apprehensive; upset, even. Focused intently on the lighter flame, Wheeler seems to be unable to look her in the eye, as if she doesn't want to push through with the next part of whatever this is actually supposed to be. Orientation? Initiation? Hazing?

What was that about getting to the point?

"It's a memorial," Moreno says.

"Hhn." Wheeler snaps the lighter shut and pockets it, moderately impressed. Only moderately, though. "That's right. Of course, I practically told you that, when I mentioned tombstones—"

"How many Antimemetics Wars have there been?"

That gets her. "Damn. So much for slow-burning theatrics. Someone told you? You read the entry?"

Moreno looks at her shoes. "Uhm. No. Really, I've never seen this place before. I was just guessing."

"You look embarrassed," Wheeler says. "You're embarrassed that you hit the right answer thirty minutes before I was expecting you to. You think you've shown me up. Right? Eli. Look at me."

She looks.

"Keep operating at that level. Don't slow up for my benefit, or anyone's. It's important."

"Will you tell me why we're here?" Moreno asks, for what she hopes will be the final time. And in another part of her mind, a fatal chain of calculations starts.

*

"The problem," Wheeler says, "is that every single person in the world with reliable access to high-grade mnestic medication works for me, here. And the Division is pitifully understaffed. There are forty of us, including you and me, and forty pairs of eyes is not enough. We cannot look at enough of the world at once. There is an appallingly large percentage of the world which no human has ever *properly* looked at. This is unbearably limiting to all forms of antimemetic research. Antimemetic biology, antimemetic paleontology, antimemetic cosmology, antimemetic archaeology... These disciplines, all of them, barely exist. They are *nowhere*.

"Nevertheless, we have seen this culture's cities. One or two still exist. Pure dumb luck is how we found them. A Division researcher takes a vacation, drives across Nevada while still on the dose... sees

something on the horizon. That sort of thing. The cities are physically ruined, and there are heavy antimemetic effects shrouding them which make them nearly impossible to study, even for us. Large, simple things, like this stone, survived better, but even so... We think this stone was one of the last things they built before they died out.

"They were human. They were probably significantly more technologically advanced than we are. They existed tens of thousands of years ago; perhaps hundreds of thousands, we can't know for sure. It's difficult to determine what really happened to them because their entire cultural memeplex was lethally irradiated. Their core cultural concepts, the things they created, and stood for, and valued highly, can never be known or propagated again.

"We think an idea stole into their culture which they did not have adaptations to defend against. A complex of ideas. A Memeplectic/ Keter-class end-of-world scenario."

Wheeler pauses, letting the rain patter for a significant moment.

"...And we just forgot?" Moreno asks. "The rest of us. Who survived the War, and became modern humanity. You and me and everybody. We, what, looked away? And walked away and 'moved on'?"

"Yes."

Moreno staggers, vertigo swelling up and briefly getting the better of her. "Hundreds of millions of people died and *we just forgot?* Is that what you wanted to show me? You want me to write that down?"

"Yes," Wheeler says. "Yes. Write this down. It's the first thing you're learning today. Humans can forget anything. It's okay to forget some things, because we are mortal and finite. But some things *we have to remember*. It's important that we remember. Write to yourself something which will make you remember."

Moreno nods. It's raining too heavily, so she retreats under the canopy and uses the table. Even so, a few rain drops spatter her notes. She writes intently and rapidly, for some time. What she writes is rushed and unrefined, with large parts crossed out. She wonders how she'll react when she reads it for the first time.

After a while, Wheeler joins her under the canopy.

Moreno, staring at her notes, asks Wheeler, as if she doesn't already know the answer: "And the second thing?"

Wheeler says:

"It is possible that their culture had an equivalent to the Foundation. It may even have had an Antimemetics Division. If they did, their Foundation, and their Antimemetics Division, failed them.

"It's a big reality. It's a big Foundation. There's a lot of Keters and a lot of Keter-class scenarios. So, maybe the end of the world will be some other Division's problem. And yes, a big part of the job we hired you for is basic research. Lab work, as safe as it gets. And yes, it's been thousands of years, and it may be thousands of years more.

"But maybe it won't. And maybe it will be our problem. To answer your original question, there has been one Antimemetics War that we know. Potentially others that we don't know of. And there is, undoubtedly, one to come."

Moreno says nothing. She looks dismayed, broken. She's right to be, and Wheeler is familiar with the reaction. This is, indeed, part of every new Antimemetics Division operative's orientation. The magnitude of responsibility can be hard to handle. It *should* be.

"Welcome to the Antimemetics Division," Wheeler says. "This is your first day."

*

Moreno writes for some time longer. Wheeler waits, silently. The rain doesn't let up.

"But what was it?" Moreno asks. "What was the idea?"

"SCP-9429-A," Wheeler says. "We isolated the memeplex itself in the Seventies. We have it on a slab in a Vegas room, basement level two. It's mostly harmless now. It's so culturally alien to modern humans as to be nearly incoherent. Think Egyptian heiroglyphs. I'll show you another day."

"I can read Egyptian heiroglyphs," Moreno says. "Are you saying it couldn't come back?"

"In that form, it's highly unlikely."

Moreno points at something, far away in the sky.

Wheeler looks. There's nothing out there. Just overcast sky and rain. "What do you see? Under heavy mnestic doses, some people say they see ghosts here. We even have some supposed interview logs. Personally, I think their veracity is dubious..."

"Um. It doesn't look like a ghost. It looks like a... an anorexic... kaiju. A monster. A pillar made of spiders. It's taller than this stone. At least twice as tall. It's coming here. Is this normal?"

"No." Wheeler is already racing through the checklist.

"What is it?"

"I don't know."

"This isn't part of the hazing?"

"No. I will never lie to you, Eli. I swear." An antimemetically cloaked entity which looks as monstrous as Moreno is describing has an approximately zero percent chance of being benign. They need support. Wheeler finds that her phone has no signal. Checking Moreno's is pointless, she already knows. The only way to get a message out of here is with a written note. A paper airplane, thrown off the top into the woods?

"It's bending down. I think it's looking at me," Moreno says, watching a space in the air descend. There isn't even a hole in the rain which Wheeler can perceive. "Its head is gigantic, it has to be ten meters wide. It has... graspers and arthropod legs all over it. Dozens of eyes. Some of them are blinded. There's someone riding it."

"What? Describe the rider."

"Caucasian male, twenties, skinny. Jeans, trainers, dirty brown hair, needs a haircut. He's been shot. He's bleeding out all over but he doesn't seem to notice. In the liver, and again in the throat, just above the clavicle. He's smiling. He... he says, 'No. That never happened.'"

Wheeler spends a split second wondering whether the gunshot wounds are intentionally creepy detailing, or whether the man is genuinely using some kind of advanced antimemetic power to ignore a mortal wound. And, if the latter, how, and how he originally sustained it. But more urgent questions are afoot. "He sees you?"

"Yes."

"Does he see me? Hear me?"

Moreno is transfixed and is starting to look genuinely frightened. "He wants to know who I'm talking to."

"Don't tell him. He doesn't get information about us, understand?" Wheeler pulls her walkie-talkie from her waist, sets it to broadcast an emergency beacon, turns and hurls it overarm as far as she possibly can, in the direction of the Site 41 main building. With luck, it'll land intact in the forest, outside the suppression zone cast by SCP-9429, summoning a Mobile Task Force. "Ask who he is."

Moreno is standing very still, with her arms clamped rigidly at her side. "Who are you?... He says... he says he's nearly finished. He says he's going to kill me."

"Like hell. Eli, listen to me. We're running for it. Back down the steps. If we can get to the perimeter of the stone it'll flush our memories."

"I can't move."

Wheeler hauls on one of Moreno's arms. She can't be moved. "Put one foot in front of the other!"

"It's got a hold of me." Moreno is goggle-eyed and starting to hyperventilate.

Wheeler disengages and surveys the situation. She can't see or touch any grasping spider legs, or the monumental face which Moreno can't look away from, or the rider. But she believes Moreno that they're there, real for some value of "real". She claps one hand to her side; but of course she isn't carrying her sidearm, because this is a Safe SCP on a Safe Site, and why would she be? Not that it even makes a difference when this mythical rider is able to laugh off gunshot wounds. There aren't enough options in front of her. She very badly wants to swear, and bites down hard on her tongue.

Moreno screams.

"Eli!" Wheeler shouts. "Don't look at it. Look at me."

"I can't."

"You're stronger than this."

"I'm not," Moreno cries.

"You're the best we have," Wheeler says. "I'm not making that up. You're seeing this thing when nobody else could. That makes you smarter and stronger. You can fight it. Invasion drill!"

"It hates us so much," Moreno says. "I can't think through it. I can't see. Please. Please don't."

Wheeler knocks her out. She circles behind Moreno, plants one hand on her shoulder for stability and punches her behind the ear. Moreno sags in place, then falls forward to her knees. Wheeler is just about able to catch her before her skull connects with the ground.

But she didn't hit her hard enough. Moreno is unconscious only for a second. She struggles as she comes back. It's like she's waking from a nightmare into another nightmare. She clutches at Wheeler's hand. She can't scream. Her heart stops.

Wheeler rolls her over and administers CPR, but without equipment there's very little chance of her restarting Moreno's heart.

Nobody's coming. She didn't throw the walkie-talkie far enough.

It's almost fifteen minutes before she gives up.

*

And then Wheeler is collapsed against the wall of the passage, on the next-to-last step, about to leave SCP-9429's field of influence, trying to figure out what in the *fuck* she can possibly write to herself.

What the hell was that thing? All Moreno did was think of it and it killed her. She was as good as any of us. She was as capable as she was ever going to be and she wasn't good enough. How do you fight an antimemetic monster which only eats the best antimemeticists?

You... you could try to build some kind of countermeme. But you'd need to be shielded while you worked on it. You'd need a hermetically sealed, self-sustaining lab as big as an arcology. Like the ones Bart Hughes used to build. Like... the one under Site 41.

God. How long have we been fighting this thing?

There's a rustling behind her. She turns to look. Far away up the steps, there he is, the rider Moreno described. A scrawny young man with a hostile frown and, yes, two steadily oozing gunshot wounds. His shoes are soaked in blood.

He calls out, "Marion Wheeler! I owe you for the lake."

Wheeler stands up. She doesn't know what lake he's talking about. But she says nothing.

The rider gestures. Blue and brown and black spiders of all sizes cascade around the corner, flooding the passageway up to his knees, pouring over his shoulders, tumbling down towards Wheeler. They make a strange, organic rustling as they pour, like wet leaves. There must be millions of them. The spiders would probably be much more effective if she was at all afraid of them.

It's too bad. She's just learned a great deal about this entity; that they have history together, and that it personally dislikes her, and that it apparently has a humanoid mouthpiece... and a lousy imagination. But she has only a second before the cascade of arachnids overcomes her, and that's not enough time to even write a single word. Moreno's death, then, was for nothing.

She steps backwards, over the threshold.

*

The rain is finally easing off. Wheeler lights a cigarette and heads back to the main building. It's almost time for her scheduled inspection of SCP-3125.

If Adam Wheeler gave it some thought, or if someone were to prompt him with the right questions, he could put words around the fact that his existence doesn't bring him any satisfaction. He would discover, on introspection, that he's nowhere close, actually, to "happy", and that there is something vast and significant missing from his life. But he doesn't give it any thought. There's a void between him and those questions. Objectively, academically, his life is great. As a professional violinist, he does what he loves the most for a living. He has talent, recognition, challenge, variety, applause, a moderate wealth. What is there to question? Why shouldn't he love it?

During slower moments, there's a grey worry in the back of his mind. It's there in the minutes right after he wakes up in the morning, before he makes it to the shower; it's there in the dead times backstage when he can't use his phone and there's nothing to do but wait to go on. It perturbs him, from time to time, that he seems to exist in a kind of long shadow, cast by a vast class of thoughts which he is unable to think. But the rest of the time, on a day to day basis, his calendar is as busy as he and his manager can make it. He performs, solo and in orchestras, he records, he composes and teaches. Every week is a different challenge. He keeps busy, and the feeling goes away if he's busy.

On the morning of the day that ಽ arrives, while he is brushing his teeth, a tiny black slug falls out of the corner of his eye into the hotel sink.

"Mpfghl?"

He scratches that eye, while drooling foam from his toothbrush. He takes a close look at himself in the mirror. Yup: there's another, fatter one growing in there, its tail protruding from his tear duct.

"I can do without this," he mutters to himself. He spits, rinses, and then takes a pair of tweezers out of his wash kit. Carefully, he nips the tiny, waving end of the slug, and tugs it out. It's no more painful than extracting a nostril hair. He drops it in the sink with its friend and washes them both away, along with the froth of toothpaste.

He stares at the plug hole for a long moment. It's like he's forgetting

something. He can't bring it to mind. He shakes his head, and goes to get dressed.

*

Wheeler has been on tour with the New England Symphony Orchestra for nearly a month. They're at their final venue, and it's their final night, and Wheeler has mixed feelings. Touring, for him, is an opportunity to explore a kind of liminal lifestyle, where he can suspend a lot of worldly concerns and just exist as a being who wakes, travels, performs and sleeps. But as novel as the experience is on paper, four weeks of it is gruelling. By this stage in the tour, even the most naturally cheerful members of the orchestra have begun to show frayed nerves, and the programme has become stale and repetitious. It's long past time for something else.

Last night, his manager left messages about plans for upcoming weeks. It's probably time he paid attention to those.

Morning rehearsal starts at eleven. Wheeler takes a taxi from the hotel to the venue, bringing his tuxedo and his violin with him. His violin is an heirloom, more than a hundred years old, and while he's touring it never leaves his sight. (His tuxedo is just a tuxedo.) The concert hall is as close to the centre of the city as it gets, at the heart of a rat's nest of busy roads, which means the taxi journey is a slog, even setting out after rush hour.

At the stage door, the place is in chaos, but it's only the typical pre-show chaos which Wheeler has spent much of his professional life navigating. He finishes a quick cigarette outside before joining the bustling flow of technicians, performers and administrative staff. He finds his way to his dressing room, changes, unpacks his violin and tunes it. He flicks through tonight's music, more out of boredom than a need to refresh his memory. He has the whole programme memorised.

With some minutes to kill, he checks the headlines on his phone. Yet again, something dreadful and new which he doesn't understand is going viral. Today's fad is, you paint a black vertical rectangle on the wall, or on a mirror, or over the top of a picture. And then you chant something. Wheeler can't quite pick out the words of the chant. They're in a language he's not familiar with. He's no singer, but he's

performed pieces with lyrics in Latin, German, Greek, French... whereas this language has a bizarre manufactured sense to it, as if it were simply English with the vowels and consonants all switched around.

Rehearsal goes reasonably. Wheeler long ago swore that he would never coast through a performance, and he plays decently well. But it seems to him as if a lot of the orchestra is distracted. Some cues get missed. He makes meaningful eye contact with the conductor a couple of times, and they share a frustrated look. When they break for dinner, late in the afternoon, the conductor, whose name is Luján, privately remarks to him, "Their eyes need fixing."

Wheeler doesn't wholly follow. He rubs his own eye with a finger, reflexively. The memory of the morning tries to punch through, but fails. "You mean, laser surgery?"

Luján responds with a few incomprehensible syllables and stalks away.

*

The auditorium opens and the seats fill. As ever, there's a brief, grey dead time while Wheeler waits for all the machinery of the performance to spin up. The anxious feeling is stronger than usual today. It grips him, an uncharacteristic urge to run away. *Sure,* he thinks. *I could just junk my career, right now. Pack it in and make for the stage door. Maybe the taxi'll still be there.*

But he pushes through it. It's just a juvenile fantasy. It's been far too long a tour. One more show and it's over.

And finally it's time, and he's out there, under the spot, in his element. The first piece of the night is Shostakovich. Its first movement is a sedate, haunting, almost melodramatic nocturne, but before too long the concerto changes gear and becomes energetic, discordant, feral.

It's lengthy, too, a real work-out, and much of it is brutally difficult to execute. He's on form tonight. Close to flawless, and his audience — which he cannot see or hear — seems rapt.

Four-fifths of the way through the piece, a kind of spell breaks. Something changes in the atmosphere of the auditorium. The temperature in the huge room seems to rise by several degrees. More concerningly and noticeably, the music behind Wheeler begins to trail off. The conductor stops too.

Perplexed, Wheeler continues to play for a moment or two, keeping to his own internal time. But after another moment it becomes clear that something is wrong, something which everybody can see but him. He steals a glance up from his instrument, and finds that Luján is staring at him. In fact, every musician in the orchestra is staring at him, all of them wearing the same expression of stony, barely-contained ang—

They've been replaced.

The orchestra is gone. All seventy of them. The things which have replaced them are not human but alien, ill-proportioned pillars of pinkish-brownish flesh. Each has, at its top, a heavy protuberance studded with goopy biological sensors and rubbery openings, and, sprouting from the very cap, lengths of various kinds of vile, off-coloured moss. They are draped in black and white fabrics, weirdly cut to either conceal or highlight their blobby, inconsistent body structures.

Wheeler reels with fright. He almost falls off the front of the stage. His stomach convulses and he wants to vomit, but a frantic fragment of his brain hasn't panicked yet and tells him, *Wait. Nothing's changed. That's what humans have always looked like. Right? What's happening? What's wrong?*

He glances, petrified, out into the darkness of the audience. The silent energy radiating off them has changed. They've been replaced too, he knows. And they know he hasn't. That's what's wrong.

Clutching his violin to his chest, Wheeler stumbles across the stage, past the conductor, towards the wing. As he does, the musicians rise slowly from their seats, letting their own musical instruments drop to one side or the other. Wheeler trips over a cellist's music stand, recovers. The conductor is following him, with the other musicians close behind.

Wheeler reaches the wing. There's a pair of stage hands there, waiting

for him. They have the same placid, angry expressions as everybody else, and the same set jaws. Wheeler stops and turns back. His heart feels like it's going to take off.

Luján, or, rather, the biped which used to be Luján, walks right up to him. He is a little shorter than Wheeler, but much heavier-set. Rooted to the spot, not thinking clearly, Wheeler holds his violin up, as if this will shield him. The conductor takes the instrument from his unresisting hands and breaks its neck underfoot, perfunctorily, as if crushing a box for recycling.

Wheeler backs off, hands raised. He bumps into the disapproving stage hands, who gently and wordlessly try to take hold of his arms. He shakes them off and is just about able to twist past them. He dives into the warren of corridors backstage. And then he runs like hell.

*

Four floors up, in some remote, poorly-lit corridor which hasn't seen regular use in years, he finds a bathroom. He goes in and throws up. This makes him feel a lot better. He washes his mouth out and then lights a cigarette, quickly filling the tiny space with a haze of smoke. That helps too.

The adrenaline has run out and his knees are still wobbling from climbing too many stairs. But it doesn't sound like anybody is closely pursuing him. So, in this safe moment, he asks himself a serious question: *Did I just have a panic attack?*

He doesn't know what a panic attack feels like. Having put so much distance between himself and the stage, what happened there feels like a crazed dream, a paranoid hallucination.

But... No. Luján broke his violin. That part definitely happened; he remembers it with distressing clarity. His relationship with Luján has never been much more than tepidly professional, but the man *was* a professional. To vandalise a precious instrument like that would be unthinkable for him, or anybody in the orchestra. There is something wrong.

With everybody.

Except him.

He flicks his cigarette butt into the toilet. He grips the sink, and looks at his reflection, and as his eyes slowly force their way back into focus, he realises, with some alarm, that what he is looking at is not his reflection. The mirror above the sink has been sloppily painted over with a tall, black, dripping rectangle. It's giving off heat; staring at it is like staring into an open oven. And he can hear a dull, grumbling, mechanical kind of noise coming from behind it. Like distant, muffled woodchippers.

He exits the bathroom and slams the door and leans against the far wall, watching the door, as if something could very well open it and come after him.

There was another one, he suddenly recalls. Another painted block, this one on the wall in his dressing room, right behind his chair, facing the back of his head. He should have seen it in the mirror whenever he was sitting there, but he didn't. And not only that, there was one in his hotel room. It was painted over the picture hanging over his bed. Did the hotel staff paint it? When, why? Why is he only remembering this now?

The viral video isn't new. Why did he think it was new? It's been circulating for months. For as long as he can remember. Forever. And — in every venue where he's been on tour, in every city, on windows and billboards, and in small rooms and liminal spaces, people have been painting these— doors—

There's a second half to each video. He remembers now. He watched it passively, over and over, and never saw it. Something comes through. It's been leaching into the background of the world this whole time, in plain sight, and he *never saw it, and it's here now*—

He's having a psychotic break.

No. That's not what's happening.

Something is trying to interfere with the way he thinks. The block symbol is jammed into his mind. He can't dislodge it. He can't think about anything else.

He looks back along the narrow corridor down which he just came. The darkness at the far end of it is yet another dark, vertical rectangle. He hears the footsteps of a multitude of people coming from that direction. Not running. Just walking briskly enough to harry him.

He needs to get out of the building. Get help.

The stage door.

*

He takes a confused zigzag route back down to street level. There's nobody in his way, and the stage door itself is unattended. He cracks it open.

Night has fallen since the performance began. There's a minor road right outside, behind the concert hall building, a yellow-lit *cul-de-sac* with a loading bay and some unattended trucks. There's a major road adjoining the minor road, rammed with stationary traffic. Some of the vehicles are, indeed, taxis, but all of them are unoccupied, and most have their doors left open. There are colossally tall darkened figures stalking down the streets, so dark and slender that Wheeler actually fails to notice them. There is screaming, a grotesque, awful screaming coming from many human mouths, coming from somewhere down the main road. But that's the only way he can go.

It's everywhere, says his last sane splinter. *Not just the concert hall. It's everyone.*

As he creeps towards the main road, someone, another occupied former human, pokes their head around the corner, then calls to others in the strange language, pointing him out. Wheeler stops in his tracks. In another moment, ten or eleven non-people are advancing on him from the road. Two of them are carrying something with them, a limp, badly broken human— a normal human, Wheeler realises with some shock, like him. The victim's heavy winter coat is torn open and his inner clothes are saturated scarlet. When the non-people carrying him catch sight of Wheeler, they toss the man violently aside, into the street, where he lands in a pile against a car wheel. He grunts with pain as he lands, face down, and once he comes to rest he takes a deep breath and lets out an inhuman, traumatised cry. But he doesn't try to move again. The non-people ignore him.

Behind him, Wheeler hears the stage door swing open again. He doesn't dare glance back.

This can't happen, says that last splinter. *This is possible, yes, real things*

exist which can do this to the world. But it doesn't happen. There's someone whose job it is to protect us from this. We're supposed to be protected.

Someone stops it from happening. Someone steps in. At the last minute.

But the last minute was a year ago. And she died.

Marion.

Oh, God.

"Help," he says, to nobody.

A feeling of weightlessness rises up in his stomach. Gravity seems to upend and pitch him forward into the waiting arms of the non-people. They restrain him. They spend some time debating what to correct first, his eyes or his fingers. Right up until it starts, he's thinking, hoping: *Maybe it won't be as bad as all that.*

But it is.

They wrestle him to the ground and pin his arm out flat, forcing his fist open to give access to his left index finger. The dread idea is beating on the door of his mind, demanding to be let in. It's wrong, the shape of it is awful and it's too big and slick with poison and he knows if he lets it in it'll swamp everything he is, filling his home up with sludge and broken glass. It wants to drown him in it and he knows it'll replace everything he is with itself. He knows it's taken the rest of the world already and all of the people around him, and he holds out, and he continues to hold out right up until one of the people pinning him produces a chisel
□□□

They, who number in the billions, and are
□□□

He regains consciousness on a hard, scrubbed floor in a wide, cool corridor. He is lying against one wall of the corridor, as if tossed there like a ragdoll, with his back to the wall and his right arm stretched out, clenched into such a tight fist that his finger joints are hurting. He releases the fist, gasping. Disoriented, aching, he rolls and plants his other hand on the floor, and it's then that he discovers what's happened to that hand.

He reacts as he must react. He clutches the stubs where his first two fingers were, and screams and cries hopelessly at the echoing building. Nobody answers him.

The last thing he remembers, he was playing Shostakovich. He was flying through it, unimpeded. In his mind, he can hear what he was playing, note-perfect, right up to the instant the memory cuts off. And he can't think of what comes next. Instead, that last incomplete snippet of music goes around and around in his head, abruptly ending mid-note and slowly fading back in again from a few seconds back, an earworm. He can't jolt himself out of it. He's a stuck record. He can never play again.

He tries to make the right shape with his remaining fingers. His hand won't do it. He rubs his eyes with his... his good hand. He feels like garbage, hung over, dehydrated. He's missing his shirt, and his arms and chest are almost grey with muck.

He can never play again.

He sits there, huddled, for a long while, being small and unhappy and lost. He knows he's going to have to move eventually. He's working his way up to it.

He looks up the corridor, eyes gradually recovering. He can see alright without his glasses, as long as he doesn't have to do much reading. He's in a school. There are notice boards, banks of lockers, a rainbow mural. The place is deserted and silent. There is a dull red light coming through the windows in the classroom doors on the far side of the corridor, suggesting that the Sun is low on that side of the building, rising or setting. He has taught one-off music lessons in one or two schools, but he doesn't recognise this one.

With some unease, he examines his bad hand. The stumps of his fingers are lumpy and uneven and have healed badly. A mass of scar tissue and scabs, and no stitches in sight. As if the digits were removed with great imprecision. Hacked off. Or bitten off? It troubles him that

he can't remember. His memory is normally so sharp and clear. He thinks he's thinking clearly, but when he concentrates and tries to access the lost time, something in that gap pushes him back. A fierce red heat.

It occurs to him that, though his severed digits have healed very badly, they *have* healed. They certainly aren't bleeding, although there's a continual ache. How long would that take?

How much time has he lost?

What the hell happened?

Way down the corridor, away from the classrooms, an office door is standing ajar. In that office, a telephone starts to ring.

*

The office is poky and dimly-lit, piled high with paperwork. Two small desks, battered office chairs. He finds the ringing phone and picks up.

"Hello?"

The voice is synthesised, female. "Mr. Wheeler?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

With a measured tone, the robotic voice replies, "Mr. Wheeler, you have been sick for an extended period of time. I will be pleased to answer all of your questions, soon. But not now. There is a woman in room W16. She is dying."

"I— I'm not a doctor."

"I know. There is nothing you can do to save her. Nevertheless, you must go to her. Now."

"I feel like I'm... I'm not the best person to do that. I'm not in the best place today."

"It has to be you. There is no one else."

"...Who is she?"

There is a pause. It is as if the entity on the other end of the phone is unable to choose her words. "She is... significant. Go now, please. She does not have much time."

Wheeler is at a loss. He doesn't seem to have the strength to not do what he's told. He doesn't have any other direction to go in. The phone handset is corded, or he'd take it with him. He frets a little about not being able to take it with him. "You'll still be here?"

"Yes."

He leaves the handset off the hook. He goes back along the silent corridor. He finds the door numbered W16 and peeks through the safety glass into the orange-red-lit classroom, squinting at the sunlight which floods it from the far windows. It's still not clear to him whether it's dusk or early morning. There is nobody in the classroom that he can see.

He opens the door and goes in. There are elaborate, colourful biology posters and coursework displays, desks in disarray, scattered books and felt-tip pens, brightly-coloured backpacks. He takes a pace or two up the central aisle, not seeing what he thinks he should be seeing, and turns around, and jumps, startled. There is a huge chalk sketch on the blackboard, a highly realistic rendering of a woman's head and shoulders. He would swear the board was blank when he walked in.

The image is moving. It's as if it's being drawn and erased and redrawn, five or ten times per second. The woman looks about his age. Her face is framed with masses of hair, although with the negative colour effect of being drawn in white chalk on a black background, it's difficult to tell what colour her hair ought to be. The one splash of colour comes from the thick, bright blue frames of her glasses.

She looks distraught. And she seems to be saying something, and though there is no sound, there is text written beside her:

Adam?

He says, "Yes?"

She says,

I remember everything

And then the words scrub themselves out and become,

I can't forget a single minute of it

More lines come out. Each new thing she says erases the old.

I know everything he did now

I was blind, and he ran rings around me

I made mistake after mistake

He killed everybody I love except for you

After this, her lips stop moving. The last phrase lingers for longer than the others, before scrubbing itself blank.

Wheeler spends a long moment absorbing the final statement, turning it around, trying to figure out where, if anywhere, it slots into his life.

He has never seen this woman before.

But... is that true? He studies her features, and his memory cycles around, and he unearths something deep and significant in his past, a bizarre encounter he hasn't devoted thought to in what feels like a century. *Her! That one time at the hospital, remember? You gouged a chunk out of your foot, backstage, after a show. You spent half a night in the emergency room, and she was there and you got talking. God. Who was she, now?*

A... government agent, or at least in that sphere. She was unreal. On a whole other level from me. Tough, skilled, beautiful, sharp like a sapphire. We talked about music. Film scores, and the trash which passed for TV sci-fi those days, and David Lynch. It was... well, you don't know, that early, but... it was promising.

But nothing happened. They patched up my foot, and we never went anywhere.

Did we?

"Marion," he breathes. He's almost got it. He holds a hand up, fearful, as if motioning for her to stop. "No. This can't be—"

I sent you away, because I was trying to save your life

He remembers. It reconnects, all at once, the years upon years of

inextricable shared life. There's too much energy there. It crashes through him, violently, it's like grabbing a frayed electrical line, it's like being shot. He stumbles backwards, disbelieving. He never imagined how much he was missing. "No. No, no. Marion."

And it didn't work

"What happened to you? I should have been there!"

And he ruined the world

And now you have to live in Hell

"Where are you? Someone said you were dying—"

I'm already dead. I'm the memory

But now the memory is dying too

He's found his way into Heaven, and he's ruining it

Like the Earth

"What do you need? I'll stop him. I'll help you. I'll do anything I can. I love you."

She says nothing.

After a moment or two, Wheeler realises that her image has frozen.

He goes up to it and peers at the chalk work. Hesitantly, with his right hand, he reaches out to the heavy chalk shading of her hair, and touches it with one finger. He leaves a dark dot. The chalk dust is real, on the board and on his finger. She's just a drawing.

She's gone. It's all gone.

He blacks out.

*

He regains consciousness on a hard, scrubbed floor at the front of a school classroom. He is lying there as if tossed beneath the blackboard like a ragdoll, one arm stretched out along the wall. He rolls over,

gasping, and plants his other hand on the floor, and it's then that he discovers what's happened to that hand.

"Dear God," he says, staring, uncomprehending, at the mangled stubs. In a strange, abstract way, the loss of his first two fingers just doesn't connect with him. It's as if he woke up already accepting it. "What the hell happened?"

He compares his left hand with his right, which, mercifully, is pristine. He flexes them, mirroring the action as best he can. There could be a little nerve damage in his left hand; he'll have to talk to his specialist. But he should be able to wield a bow.

"I suppose I'm playing left-handed from now on," he says to himself. Good God. How long is it going to take him to get to the same level of proficiency? A good while.

He thinks back. The last thing he can remember is playing Shostakovich. He was flying through it, and he was having no trouble. He can almost hear what he was playing, note-perfect, right up to the instant the memory abruptly cuts off. But he can't think of what came next. Instead, that final snippet fades in again from a few seconds back, repeats itself right up to the cut-off point, and stops, almost with an audible click. It's an earworm. He feels like a stuck record.

So he does what he always does: hums a different song to displace it.

He feels strange. He is hung over, dehydrated. He's missing his shirt, and his arms and chest are almost grey with muck. And he is dying, positively dying, for a cigarette. But he feels strangely upbeat. As if he's recovered from a prolonged illness. As if the worst is over.

He gets up, eyes gradually recovering. He can see alright without his glasses, as long as he doesn't have to do much reading. The classroom is silent, lit red-orange from a Sun which could be rising or setting. There are elaborate, colourful biology posters and coursework displays, desks in disarray, scattered books and felt-tip pens, brightly-coloured backpacks. The blackboard is blank.

Wheeler has taught one-off music lessons in one or two schools, but he doesn't immediately recognise this one.

Way down the corridor from the classroom, an office door is standing ajar. In that office, a telephone starts to ring.

*

The office is poky and dimly-lit, piled high with paperwork. There are two small desks, each with a beaten-up office chair. Each desk has a phone, one of which is off its hook. He puts it back, obeying a hard-wired instinct to tidy up. It's the other phone which is ringing, though, of course.

"Hello?"

The voice is synthesised, female. "Mr. Wheeler?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

With a measured tone, the robotic voice replies, "Before we begin, may I ask you a quick question? Does the name 'Marion Hutchinson' mean anything to you?"

"Not as such. Should it?"

The synthesised voice makes it impossible to tell whether the caller is dismayed at this, indifferent or relieved. "No. ...My name is Ulrich. I'm part of an organization called the Foundation. The objective of the Foundation was to prevent what has happened from happening."

Wheeler turns around, suddenly afraid. But there is nothing behind him. "And what," he asks with some trepidation, "has happened?"

"The world's gone to hell, Mr. Wheeler."

"Well. Bad luck there."

There is a long pause. Long enough that Wheeler wonders to what insane degree he might have understated the situation. "...Yes. Very bad luck. Mr. Wheeler, we need your help. And by 'we need your help' I mean I need your help. Because there is no one left of the Foundation but me. And I have no one but you. And I am dying."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, Ms. Ulrich," Wheeler says. He finds that he means it. He chooses his next words with some care. "What do you need?"

"I need you to find a man named Bartholomew Hughes.

Please take a seat. I will explain everything."

Unthreaded

Marion Wheeler used strong mnestic medication nearly every day of her life. Among the Identity Warriors of Mobile Task Force ω-0, "Ará Orún", it was never in doubt that, on the occasion of her death, she would ascend into the noösphere. She would become a Bader-Ramjin Infomorphic Entity or a Type VI Volitional Spiritual Apparition or a "ghostie" or however she wished to describe her new self. Then, she would join the Citizens of Heaven, and continue the Antimemetics Division's fight from *higher ground*, likely with fearsome effectiveness.

But Wheeler died under terrible circumstances. The Class-Z drug which killed her did more than reinforce her memory; it destroyed her ability to do anything but remember. She ascended, arriving in the noösphere to a hero's welcome, but what arrived was an ideoform so severely brain-damaged that it was barely able to communicate.

After she was made as comfortable as possible and an initial diagnosis had been made, Sanchez off-handedly described her as "a Swiss watch filled with glue".

Ulrich yelled at him for saying it, and would have hit him for his callousness. "How can she make it to Heaven sick?" she said. "Isn't that just Hell?"

The Director apologised, in the corporate, false way in which he always apologised for anything.

"How much more does she have to go through?" Ulrich said. "Who deserves this life?"

It hurt all of them. Regardless of personal investment in the mission, it was difficult not to care for someone whom they had watched and guarded for years. They continued to take care of her in the same way they always had, in shifts. Wheeler, dimly aware of her condition, worked against the problem in the instinctive, fierce way she worked against every problem. She slowly became more coherent, but never became herself again. Ulrich, on her shifts, saw that Wheeler spent most of her existence reliving her final moments over and over. She would recite what seemed to be half of a conversation with SCP-3125 itself, a conversation which several of ω-0 said they recognised from Operation Cold City.

"Ideas can be killed."

"Marion," Ulrich asked her gently. "Where is Bart Hughes? He's the only one who can stop this now. We know he's alive, or he'd be here with us. Just a hint. Just a clue. Please."

She was trying. Ulrich knew that she was trying to say: *I don't know. I can't remember something I never knew in the first place.* But all she could manage was:

"With better ideas."

"Keep pushing her," Sanchez told Ulrich when she reported back to him. "At least once per shift."

"The questioning is causing her considerable distress," Ulrich said. "We know she doesn't know anything. It's cruel to keep trying. Sir."

"SCP-3125 is coming," Sanchez replied. "With the quick arm of the Antimemetics Division eliminated, there's nothing left which can stop it. Our real-world investigative capabilities are negligible, Hughes' sister doesn't know anything, and this is our sole remaining lead. I know you admire Wheeler more than anyone—"

"She mentored me. She drove me to be the best person I have ever been. She honored my memory when I died. My own family wouldn't."

"Ulrich—"

"We are the saints who guard! I will guard her!"

Sanchez paused. Ulrich's devotion to Wheeler — and the lesser devotion of the others — irked him mildly. He viewed Wheeler as... well, competent enough, but ultimately a failure. She was as much of a failure as everybody else in the Division, with only the uninteresting distinction of being the last of the failures.

But he was vulnerable to the kind of rhetoric Ulrich had just employed. It stoked a kind of fire inside him. Heaven knew he used it in his own communications often enough, for exactly the same purpose.

"Alright," he said. "The trawl in reality is continuing. There's a faint chance we'll find something of substance. Carry on as you were. No questions."

*

SCP-3125 incarnated the following winter.

Its first act upon its arrival — or, depending on the degree of intelligent agency you ascribed to it, the first side-effect *of* its arrival — was the neutralisation of the Foundation. In the space of a night, an international staff of tens of thousands disappeared into oblivion, or became amnesiac, or simply dropped brain-dead where they were standing. Foundation Sites became hollow, inaccessible dead zones. A few anomalies broke containment in the chaos, to devastating effect; thousands of others were choked into irrelevant obscurity beneath SCP-3125's antimemetic pressure.

The world can only end one way, it seemed to be declaring, gouging its statement into the flesh of reality. *My world. My way.*

SCP-3125 had skirmished with ω-0 before, but it had always been unclear how much information about ω-0 it retained between skirmishes. In fact it was unclear, fundamentally speaking, how SCP-3125 thought at all. Its behaviour was inconsistent, unpredictable and frightening; records of its activities were cognitohazardous, discouraging close analysis.

In the end, the question proved to be academic. When SCP-3125 arrived, whether it knew ω-0 was there or not, it took no special action against it, and had no need to. Most of ω-0's members' anchors were Foundationers, or Foundation-adjacent. With those people's minds blown away in the first strike, the dense web of mutual memory which had held the Task Force together since its formation tore loose. More than half of the Task Force was cast into the void and died; the final, real death they had evaded for years.

Around dawn, Eastern Standard Time, Sanchez announced that it was no longer possible for ω-0 to stay together as a single entity. He split the remains of the Task Force into three. Ulrich and the malformed memory of Wheeler were assigned to the same subteam. Sanchez gave final instructions to continue to search for Bart Hughes, or any kind of ally among the living, be they Foundation or GOI or civilian. But the instructions were confusing and incomplete. It was because Sanchez didn't have an iota of faith in what he was saying. He couldn't see a way to the far side of this. It was about little more than survival now. It was about figuring out terms on which to face death.

Ulrich never saw him again.

*

She fled, with Wheeler and the others in their little subteam, across the face of a noösphere which was rapidly becoming uninhabitable. The world was warping around SCP-3125's presence at the core of human thought, like real space around a black hole. It was building things, real physical artifacts, in the centre of cities. It was extruding them, as if from spores; monumental concrete structures, into which people were being fed in dizzying numbers. It was difficult to know what was happening inside of the structures. Some of the millions were dying in there. Some weren't. Ulrich didn't look. They found out the ugly way that it was dangerous to look closely.

The subteam was steadily running out of anchors. It could have been a systematic purge, but it could just as easily have been simple statistics. Roving physical and psychic anomalies, vast in their own right and slaved to SCP-3125, were combing the Earth, stripping it of objectors and feeding them into SCP-3125's maw. Ulrich's own anchor, a woman who had never known what the Foundation was but who remembered Ulrich with a heavy heart nearly every day, was killed around that time; found in the hills where she'd been hiding and dragged down into the inferno.

Ulrich wasn't looking. She didn't find out until it was too late. She felt the thread of memory come loose, and followed it, panicking, past its flapping end and down into physical reality, where there was nothing. A collapsed tent. A scuffed-out firepit where everything important had been piled up and burnt.

"Who was she?" another ω-0 operative asked her. Ulrich had never spoken about it.

"I only knew her for two days," Ulrich said. "When I was younger. She saved my life, that's all."

This was it, she realised. She was a career Foundationer. An experienced Mobile Task Force operative, for God's sake. She had gone through unimaginable horrors, and stacked them up as experience and kept going. But this, Julia's tent and silence and no Julia, was the worst thing she had ever seen.

Short of hope and resources, the subteam had to split again, this time into pairs. Ulrich stayed with Wheeler, clinging to her like a rock, remembering her and being remembered in turn. A cooperating pair could survive untethered for a little while, but not forever.

*

They found shelter on a distant edge of the noösphere, in a clutch of arcane structures left there millennia earlier by a long-dead human culture. They were followed, though they didn't realise.

One night, Wheeler managed to talk. She said, "Adam." It was the first thing she had managed to say which wasn't a direct quote from her own expiring moments.

Ulrich was shocked by this. "You remember him?"

The sentence came out agonisingly slowly, as if each syllable was like climbing a mountain: "I remember everything."

Ulrich stared. She knew that Class-Z mnestics made it impossible for the subject to forget. She also knew that they could cause long-erased memories to reassert themselves — some of them, anyway, depending on the mechanism and intensity of the erasure process. She had hoped that Wheeler's memories of her husband were permanently gone, because she knew they ended in a terrible place.

"...I don't know where Adam is," she had to tell Wheeler. It was the truth. Nobody did. ω-0 operatives had, with some solemnity, observed the erasure of Adam Wheeler's mind. But, out of respect for Marion's decision and to preserve Adam's safety, they had intentionally diverted their attention during his relocation, destroying their records. "He might be alive. I don't know." She didn't know which alternative was worse.

"Daisy," Wheeler said. "Look." She was holding something in her hands, a pitiful glowing ideoform. A thought of someone.

It was him. A thread of memory which led right to him. It was some kind of miracle, it had to be, that Wheeler had picked him out from the livid, insensate mass of victims which now formed SCP-3125's core. He was nearly unrecognisable. He was overrun with SCP-3125.

At first glance it seemed to occupy every nerve in his body. But there was a flickering seed in the back of his mind, a final remnant of what he had once been. It wasn't growing. There was too much pressure. But it was trying to. He was pushing back.

Ulrich boggled. She had known that there was something weird and highly rare about the way Adam Wheeler's mind was structured, a kind of thick-skulled resistance to external interference. In fact, she knew that thousands and thousands of people in the world shared that immunity — but that was another way of saying that, among the billions, such people were fantastically rare and difficult to locate. Efforts by ω-0 to locate them and recruit them as allies had failed. They did not look special or behave radically differently from others. There was no signal flare which went up. It was possible that they were all dead. It was conceivable that Adam Wheeler was the only one of them left in the whole world.

But he was left. He was alive.

"I see him," Ulrich said.

Wheeler didn't respond.

"I'll get him out of there," Ulrich said. Her stomach was knotting up with the sheer thought of attempting it. "I'll bring him to you."

Wheeler didn't respond. Six original, coherent words had exhausted her. She was crazed with frustration at how incapable she had become. She felt as if she was pinned beneath a huge lead block of memory. It hurt to think. It hurt to exist.

Ulrich's ability to interact with the physical universe was extremely limited. Other operatives of ω-0 had been able to create full-on poltergeist activity, changing the temperatures of rooms and throwing furniture around, but she was not that kind of specialist. She could do little more than place phone calls and write on walls. Those abilities weren't likely to get Adam Wheeler moving. Simple words were never going to reach him. The man wasn't even truly conscious.

What Ulrich could do was something the Task Force dubbed Identity Offense. She could interfere with the internals of living minds to make things happen. Usually enemies; usually the mental equivalent of blunt force trauma, to make them die. But she could act with surgical precision if it was called for.

Operating on Adam Wheeler was difficult and time-consuming. His

mind was tough, and it was continually bathed in SCP-3125's radioactive presence. Ulrich would cut, and then wait as Wheeler's mind self-healed, which took days, and then she would cut again. The seedling metaphor served well. The operation reminded her of tending a plant. If nothing else, the whole procedure took real-time weeks. The patience required to keep her hands off for days at a time was nearly inhuman.

Wheeler said nothing else in that time. She was conserving energy. It felt as if she had a finite number of words left in her, and speaking each one brought her an inch closer to the end. She had to wait.

"He'll be here," Ulrich said. "Soon."

*

Now Ulrich watches from a great, abstract distance, as Adam Wheeler folds up.

Marion Wheeler is dead, finally, truly dead, and Adam Wheeler's mind is breaking apart. It's an awful and incredible thing to watch. Even passing into the maw of SCP-3125 and back wasn't enough to permanently break him. But this was it, the silver bullet. This was the way to hurt Adam Wheeler in such a way that he would never recover. Present his wife to him, a brain-damaged wreck, just in time for her to die.

Ulrich writes on the blackboard — off to one side, so as not to mar the image of Marion, and in different handwriting:

I'm sorry

I'm so sorry

Adam, please come back to the phone

I need your help

Adam is prostrate on the floor, and becoming catatonic. He doesn't hear it when Ulrich tries calling the other office phone, the one on the other desk.

And she, too, is dying now. She and Marion were anchoring one

another as best they could, but it's the end of the line. She has, perhaps, hours.

"Alright," she says, to no one. There is no one else left.

She rolls up her figurative sleeves. This will not be too difficult for her. Adam Wheeler's revived memories of his wife shine inside him, and around the edge she can see the faint scar where they were burnt out the first time. She has a better vantage point; she can do a cleaner, more permanent job.

This will hurt. Just as much as it did then.

"I need her," Adam says. He's still face-down. "Don't take her. Please."

Ulrich writes,

You need to save the world

There's nobody else

Adam doesn't look up, but he says:

"To hell with the world. It can burn."

*

He recovers a second time. He's fine. Upbeat, game. Eager to get moving.

She explains everything she can. Tersely. Just the keywords. The Foundation, the Antimemetics Division, the situation, the objective. He absorbs it all surprisingly well. He asks cogent follow-up questions, which is always a positive sign.

"This 'thread of memory' which was sustaining you," he says. "Don't I count? I'll remember you."

"Your memory could be strong enough," she replies. "But you just don't know me well enough."

"Ah. That's regrettable."

Ulrich tells him, in detail, how to find Site 41. It's going to be an

immense trek, made significantly longer by Wheeler's need to avoid urban areas. She describes the antimemetic shroud which obscures Site 41 and most other Foundation Sites, a shroud she and the rest of ω-0 found to be totally impenetrable — a shroud which Wheeler, if he prepares himself, may be able to walk straight through. She warns him about the psychotic hurricane-like anomalies, and the violent roaming agglomerations of SCP-3125-occupied non-humans. She describes a few techniques for avoiding their attention. She decides not to voice her private hope that, as a recent escapee from SCP-3125's interior, Wheeler will still "smell right" to them and be able to pass. She doesn't want him becoming overconfident and incautious.

She explains basic survival skills.

"I hike, I camp," Wheeler says. Still, he has never hiked or camped in an occupied foreign world. He has never gone months without electricity and plumbing. They find that they have plenty to talk about.

They are on the phone for long enough that Adam notices that the red Sun outside the office window isn't moving. It hasn't risen. It hasn't set. Either the world's stopped turning completely, or the thing hanging out there isn't the Sun.

"Unknown," Ulrich has to tell him. "There was a Foundation which could answer this question, once."

"It seems like this Foundation had the world's better interests at heart," Wheeler says.

In Heaven, Ulrich laughs, weakly. "The Foundation was never so simple," she says.

"...Ms. Ulrich, I sense we're coming to the end of our time together."

"Yes."

"The odds stacked against you were tremendous," Wheeler says. "But you saved my life. And the odds stacked against me are, well, still appalling. But significantly better, thanks to you. I'll do my level best. And I will remember you, even if it doesn't make a difference."

"Kill this thing, Mr. Wheeler," Ulrich says. "When you get the chance, don't hesitate."

"Aye," Wheeler says.

And at the same time, someone behind Ulrich laughs, sharply, once.

She turns. There's a man there, standing with her in the noösphere, a gaunt younger man with an awful, open-mouthed grin. He has been waiting, silently and excitedly, for an unknowable amount of time for Ulrich to notice him. And now that she does, he gets everything he could possibly want from her reaction, a rush of delectable horror and alarm. Then he cuts her off, killing her instantly, before she can get one syllable of warning to Wheeler.

Wheeler hears nothing. A faint *click*, and then a dial tone.

He hangs up.

Wild Light

The meeting room is Containment Unit S167-00-1006, which is the skull of a stillborn *Cryptomorpha gigantes*.

The hollowed-out space inside the skull cavity is a prototypical Vegas room — a place where what happens, stays. People go in, they come out, their memories are sieved out of the universe as they leave, and they remember nothing. The skull was acquired in the Nineties. The information suppression effect is a byproduct of the species' natural antimemetic camouflage, a phenomenon which rendered the colossally tall creatures somehow nearly impossible to observe in the wild. It's a phenomenon Dr. Bartholomew Hughes and his team spent years figuring out how to replicate. They've got it, now. They can synthesise *C. gigantes* bone, extruding it in prefabricated pieces from steel grids. They can bolt the plates together to make hermetically sealed boxes. Passive memetic insulation, no need for complicated machines; it's got a lot of potential.

The skull is forty-five metres long, sixteen wide and fifteen tall. It resides at the centre of a vast purpose-built containment unit of its own, surrounded by the rest of the same *C. gigantes* individual's bones, laid out in meticulous radial patterns for space efficiency. The ossuary occupies about a third of the containment unit's floor area. The rest comprises immense industrial vessels which hold its harvested organs. Some of them are actual vessels, repurposed cargo ships loaded with brain matter and skin tissue.

The floor plan of the warehouse is clear enough, navigable if grim. But from ground level, on foot, the place is a vertiginous, intimidatingly macabre place, even fluorescent-lit around the clock. Hughes walks down an echoing canyon created by, on his left, a hundred-metre-long foreleg bone and on his right, the blue steel container holding the creature's first stomach. Ahead, the skull peers down the canyon at him, a distant yellow-white tower, fuzzed with scaffolding and disused scanning rig, its eye sockets vacant black.

As he walks, Hughes has to remind himself continually that these are all the remains of a single organism, one of the tiniest examples of its species.

Behind the skull, where there used to be the creature's first neck

vertebra, there is now a large compound mechanical airlock, a ramp and some steps, and a staging area. The staging area serves as a miniature customs desk, tracking every person and item entering and leaving S167-00-1006. Although memories are wiped on exit, written and electronic records emerging from the interior have to be handled manually. Standard procedure is for the first person exiting the room to bring written instructions for the Filtration Officer, telling them what other information from the room interior needs to be scrubbed, and what is safe to retain. Usually the list of information to retain is very short.

There are seats, scanners, a coffee machine, a trolley loaded with cleaning equipment, and a stack of cages for the germs. Parked just outside of the staging area, there is also a limousine — bulletproof.

"Where's everybody else?" Hughes asks the Foundationer who meets him, whose name is Bochner. "I'm not late."

"This way, please," she says, leading him to a seat near a scanner. Hughes has gone through this procedure a dozen times now, so he knows to hold his left arm out. Bochner tears the wrapper off a sterile bracelet-like sensor and clamps it around Hughes' left wrist, then observes a nearby screen. "They went in almost an hour ago," she says.

Hughes frowns. That's not usual. Why would they tell him a different start time? Why would they need an hour of preparation time before he showed up? "Did they say anything?"

"Of course not."

Hughes hasn't the slightest clue what this meeting is about, or what any of the previous meetings were about, or even if they have a common topic.

Actually, he does have some clues. The timing of the meetings is one. The first took place early this year, and when they emerged, amnesiac, they were clutching written instructions from themselves to themselves to continue meeting monthly. Around October, the meetings became weekly. They had three last week. And after Friday, they created a new schedule: they meet for ninety minutes every morning, starting today, Monday.

A more significant clue is the list of attendees. Other than Hughes, three high-calibre researchers from his own organisation are in attendance, along with the directors of Sites 41, 45 and 167, the last of whom is Michael Li, the Foundation's chief of Antimemetics and

Hughes' direct manager.

He steals a glance at the car parked behind him. There's also *this* guy. Or gal. Hughes doesn't know for sure to whom the limo belongs, but the list of people in the world who have the authority to drive a street vehicle into a Foundation containment building is extremely short. Well, not to prevaricate, it's thirteen people. There is an O5 in the room. An O5 is extremely interested in their covert discussions. This is a new and nontrivially alarming development.

He nods at the car. "Shouldn't this place be lousy with private security right now?"

Bochner shrugs.

"Anybody go into the unit with the O5? Bodyguard? Anybody stay in the car?"

"No."

Hughes glances at the car again. The windows are tinted, though surely there's a driver behind the wheel, at least. But where's the real protection? Maybe it's all invisible. Microbes. Occult spells of warding. He feels like the car is watching him back.

"Open your mouth, please." Bochner puts a disc-like cap on Hughes' head, presses an emitter to the roof of his mouth, and fires two pulses of radiation through his brain. "Any psychic intrusions?"

Muffled by the emitter, Hughes manages, "Uh-uh."

She pulls out the emitter and discards it. "Did you experience REM sleep in the past twelve hours?"

He wipes his mouth. "Yes."

"How many digits do you have?"

"Ten."

"Count them for me, please."

Hughes spreads his fingers and counts them. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten." His right thumb is "five".

Bochner injects him with a substance which will prevent his body from rejecting the germ, then lifts a germ out of one of the cages. It

splays its tendrils out, confused, not a fan of being picked up. "Tilt your head back and look at the ceiling, please. Eyes wide open. And, if you could take off your glasses."

Hughes obliges, handing his glasses to Bochner for scanning. "I dislike this part," he states.

Bochner has no comment. She lays the germ over his eyes, like a sleep mask. There's a cold, sludgy sensation as it wraps itself around his chin and hair, then the tendrils meet behind his neck and begin knitting with his spine. Hughes sees darkness for a few worrying seconds, then a circular indentation forms in the germ's hide over the top of his right eye, and there's a feeling like part of his brain dislocating, and a fake eye opens where his real one would be. The fake eyeball is around four times the size of his own. Though it is singular, its four pupils grant him decent depth-perception, and he can see a little way into the ultraviolet.

The germ is acting as an external block of short-to-medium-term memory, and as a proxy between the conscious Bart Hughes and the real world. When the meeting is over, the germ will be removed and incinerated, along with all memory of the meeting.

There are other amnestic approaches — gas, injectable drugs, surgical techniques, occult rituals. These are safe, proven technologies for mass use on the general public and Foundation staff alike, but they all operate on the same essential principle that the unwanted knowledge has already entered the mind and must now be removed or suppressed after the fact. Such procedures are imperfect. Memory removal can leave critical fragments behind, occasionally enough for people to rebuild dangerous wholes; and mnestic technologies for causing suppressed memories to reassert themselves are continually advancing. Recent developments on the latest-generation family of biochemical mnestics, Class Z, seem likely to produce a substance which renders *all* after-the-fact memory erasure techniques irrelevant. The only amnestic defence against Class Z will be decapitation. So, if there's advance warning time, it's better to physically compartmentalise, to airgap; to outsource the memories to another organism entirely and never let them touch your own mind. You can't be forced to recall something which you genuinely never experienced.

It's a complex and dynamic field, one of several fields in which Hughes is a world expert. There are machines which could perform the same task as the germ, silicon modules you wear like a headset, plugged into a surgically implanted jack behind your ear, but Hughes

would rather die than submit to interfacing his brain directly with a computer, especially a Foundation-made computer. Nobody is getting his brainwaves. When he joined the Foundation, thirty years ago, he put a DNU in his will — Do Not Upload. Everybody thought he was crazy.

Of course, using both the germs *and* a Vegas room feels rather like overkill. That's another clue.

"Your belongings have been scanned," Bochner tells him. He refills his pockets and takes up his laptop. Walking slightly unsteadily because of the new weight he's carrying on his head, he climbs the stairs to the airlock.

*

Hughes would be the first to admit that a typical Foundationer has appalling taste. A typical Foundationer picks brutal functionality over aesthetic pleasure one hundred times out of one hundred, and a depressing percentage of Foundationers don't even comprehend the distinction. Hughes sees this reflected in the architectural choices and interior design of the Foundation's buildings and offices, and in its labs and containment facilities, which commonly cultivate a hopeless, bleak-cliff-edge atmosphere. He sees it in its machinery, its devices, its tools and even its font choices. Hard edges, clashing colours, failing aircon, impersonality, clutter, claustrophobia.

And so, S167-00-1006's interior is a surprise and a delight. Hughes actually sighs. It seems like someone hired a designer. The place is spacious and modern, well-lit, with select walls painted in bright secondary colours. There's not a bit of exposed concrete in sight.

S167-00-1006 isn't a single space but a self-contained suite laid out on two floors. There's a central meeting area with a double-height ceiling, a long oval table and Herman Miller chairs. Along the left wall there are smaller breakout meeting rooms with frosted glass walls and doors. Above those, reached by a flight of stairs, there's a kitchen area, and in the back are some additional rooms, restrooms and storage. The carpet is grey and orange, a non-repeating hexagonal pattern. The place is well-ventilated, and smells of coffee.

There are four people waiting for him. Marion Wheeler, who runs Site

41, is descending the kitchen stairs, holding a steaming disposable cup. Graves, director of Site 45, is at the main table, typing at a laptop. Michael Li is at the back of the room chatting with O5-8. All of them are wearing germs. The four huge eyeballs of the four germs swivel in unison to stare at Hughes as he comes in. It's a highly disconcerting effect. Hughes forces himself to smile back.

"You're here," O5-8 says. He is... strange-looking, even accounting for the germ. Hughes has never seen an O5 before, and O5-8 looks very unlike what he expected. He tries not to stare, but his own germ is extremely good at staring.

"You're all caught up?" Hughes asks. The nature of the asynchronous work loop is that the first quarter of any meeting in a Vegas room is spent reading notes left from prior meetings. Hughes' (correct) guess is that there's been an hour-long pre-meeting, and then everybody broke for coffee, and now they're resuming.

"We are," O5-8 says. He takes a seat at the head of the table, with Graves to his left. Li sits to his right, and Wheeler to Li's right. O5-8 indicates a particular vacant chair, opposite Wheeler, where a printed document is waiting for Hughes to read it.

Hughes sets his laptop down, hesitant to approach the document. "You want me to read this now?"

"Take as long as you need."

"Where's my team?" Hughes asks. "We're three bodies short."

"Read the document, Dr. Hughes," O5-8 says. He seems upbeat. Perhaps he's projecting an upbeat facade to help Hughes to forget exactly how much authority and power he wields. His net worth is said to be essentially infinite. It's not really about money at his level. He, and his kind, can do *anything*.

Hughes sits, and reads.

The document is a scientific paper purportedly authored by Hughes himself, with various of his fellow researchers co-authoring, including two who should be in this room now. Hughes doesn't recognise the paper's title or content, but that's nothing special in his line of work. The text is written in his own formal, academic style, so he has no reason to doubt its authenticity.

It's a brisk read, very dense and to-the-point, written for a target

audience of other memetics scientists. In the abstract, it announces the observation of a new, titanically powerful and dangerous (anti)memeplex, provisionally designated SCP-3125, for which the authors plan to seek Apollyon classification.

"Hmm."

The main body of the first page describes eight different phenomena, most but not all of them anomalous, most but not all of the anomalous ones controlled by the Foundation and having SCP designations. From a cursory glance, the phenomena appear to be totally unrelated, either to one another or to the proposed SCP-3125. Hughes suspects he could derive the implied link between them, given a few minutes, but elects to read on. He flips the piece of paper over. The whole document is just two sides of A4.

The other side is mostly mathematics. There is one graph, and one equation, and a brief technical description of two highly novel memeplectic transformation procedures, which the authors dub "amplification". Then there's—

—something like a jump scare in text form. There's a crucial logical leap, and for Hughes, the arrival of comprehension is so blunt, so sudden and frightening that it physically startles him. Even knowing that the word "Apollyon" was on the table, even primed to expect something extremely nasty on this side of the paper, he recoils. "Oh, *fucking* hell."

Nobody else says anything. They wait, expectantly, for Hughes to gather his thoughts and draw some conclusions.

He reads the rest of the paper, figuring out what it's going to say almost live as he reads it. As he reaches the end, the initial shock hasn't worn off. The sheer scope of SCP-3125 is a significant distance beyond his current comprehension. He's had a glimpse of it through a keyhole. He would need time in front of a computer to play with the results to get a grasp of it.

No. He needs to build *filters* first, the equivalent of lead-lined gloves, to let him manipulate this radioactive idea complex with some degree of safety. He feels like *it* may have glimpsed *him*.

Apollyon classification is reserved for highly destructive active anomalies which are functionally impossible to contain — something past Keter. An Apollyon-class anomaly is an anomaly more or less guaranteed to ultimately destroy the world, no matter what is done to

stop it. The only thing which can avert that particular XA-class scenario is if something else, likely some other Apollyon-class anomaly, destroys the world first. Their relative threat level is measured not in material containment resources but in inevitable years. Off the top of his head, Hughes would put that figure as a single digit.

"Yeah, this is it," he says. It's bizarrely liberating. "This is the one that's going to kill us." He looks around the table. "Did we obtain Apollyon classification?"

"No," O5-8 says.

"No?"

O5-8 smiles thinly. "Current thinking in the Overseer space is that Apollyon classification is a confession of defeat. It's bad for morale. It cultivates defeatist attitudes. Aside from the special classifications, Keter is considered the top of the hierarchy as of right now. All extant Apollyons are likely to be re-evaluated and re-classified Keter over the next year or so. Other than that, what do you think?"

Hughes says, "You want containment procedures? We've had this conversation a bunch of times before, correct?"

"Let's imagine this is the first time," O5-8 says.

Hughes stares darkly at his paper. "We could exterminate all intelligent human life," he says. "If there are no sapient hosts in this universe, SCP-3125 can't incarnate."

There's a faintly stunned pause. "Yes," Wheeler says. "You've pitched that approach before. And I don't think any of us here have ever been completely sure if you were serious."

"I'm completely serious that we could do it, and completely serious that it would work," Hughes says. "Our mission statement is 'Secure, contain, protect'. Somewhere down the line we really should look into adding 'and keep as many human beings alive as possible' to that."

"It's implicit that humanity is what we protect," Graves says.

"Secure the anomalies, contain the anomalies, protect the anomalies. How does it scan otherwise?"

"We're getting off-topic," Wheeler says. "We're not exterminating all

sapient life."

"We could immediately terminate and suppress all memetics and antimemetics research worldwide," Hughes says. "We would have to systematically dismantle the whole scientific field forever. Stop all the experiments, scrap all the research, brainwash all the researchers. If nobody actively researches this field, nobody will ever find SCP-3125. It stays buried in the farthest reaches of ideatic space indefinitely, like radioactive waste." He looks up at the ceiling. The problem is interesting. "Ironically, the most practical way to do that would be to develop an artificial meme. One which encodes the idea that memetics research is intrinsically worthless and harmful. Enrich it with religious or pseudoscientific virals and release it to the general public. A year after it got out we'd be tearing our own labs down. Unless the Antimemetics Division's institutional immunity to that kind of external threat was strong enough to stand up to the pressure. Interesting scenario. Even if we don't go in that direction we should definitely think about wargaming it in simulation, see what outcomes are likely —"

"Bart," Wheeler says.

"No, hiding wouldn't work. It could be introduced externally or occur naturally—"

"We know. Bart, that's already happened. SCP-3125 is incarnating as we speak. Look at these precursor anomalies. We're in what you called the foreshadow. It's *here*."

Wheeler's referring to predictive models which Hughes must have created himself during prior meetings, models with which he doesn't have time to familiarise himself. Still, he gets it.

He wishes he didn't get it. His fear comes from a completely different place from most people's. The sheer alien scale of the adversary is enough to intimidate most into petrified submission. From a cursory read, SCP-3125 looks like a nightmare scenario; it's going to turn human civilisation into something beyond Hughes' ability to imagine. But that's every Monday in this job, and in any case Hughes doesn't have much of an imagination. He is intimately familiar with almost the entire SCP database, and he's a world authority in anomalous containment. The few areas of science he doesn't have genius-level ability in, he has trusted colleagues who do. They are all solved problems, locked boxes.

This is different. He has more ideas, but there is, mechanically, no way to start working on the problem. It would eviscerate him the moment he tried to comprehend the entire problem. He'd need to design and build the box while *already inside the box he was building*. He would need to box the *universe*.

He looks around the room's walls. They seem to be holding up.

"We could hide in units like this for the rest of our lives," he says. "Our whole species. While SCP-3125 roamed our reality unchecked, like a plague. I declare this to be the exterior of the containment unit. Done."

No reaction.

"I don't think we can do it," he says. "If SCP-3125 is live in consensus nominality right now, the game is over. I don't care if Apollyon classification lives or dies, from where I'm sitting this anomaly is functionally uncontainable. I... my team and I may have said something different on prior iterations. I could be in the wrong headspace to see the answer. We are all of us different people from day to day."

"No," O5-8 says. "You say the same thing every time."

"So that's it. Is that it?"

O5-8 says, "The objective of the Foundation is protection. In the majority of cases this involves the secure containment of anomalous entities; the establishment of special containment procedures such that such entities can be kept safely, and indefinitely. Standard guidance is against active neutralization and to avoid destruction at all costs. Everybody in this room is aware of this. However, senior Foundation officials such as me have the right to waive that guideline under certain narrow conditions. I am exercising that right. I deem that in our reality, SCP-3125 cannot coexist with human civilization. We're going to destroy SCP-3125. Forever. Does that change your outlook any?"

"Special neutralization procedures," Hughes deadpans. His expression is worsening by the minute.

O5-8 adds, "I know that neutralization is... *generally* considered easier than mere containment."

Hughes says:

"When I first joined the Foundation, I asked my mentor, who retired many years ago, 'What's the biggest anomaly we've ever contained?' That he was cleared for, I meant, of course. And he told me about a very old rumor he once heard, back in *his* earliest days, when he was just starting out. The rumor was that Abrahamic religions had not always been monotheistic. Originally, there were three capital-G Gods. And sometime in the past hundred and fifty years, the Foundation had killed two of them.

"I believed him. I was very young and inexperienced, and naive, and kind of in awe. It wasn't until years later that I thought back to the conversation — and the fact that I'd never heard that rumor, or anything like it, from anybody else — and realised he had been bullshitting me.

"And now it's decades later still, and modern memeplectic technology is a hundred billion times more advanced than it was back then, and I built thirty percent of it, and I look at what the Antimemetics Coalition handles on a quarterly basis, and I know better than anybody on the face of this Earth what is or is not possible, and..."

He trails off. They're all waiting expectantly for him to say something. He can't get there. He's in the wrong frame of mind. Maybe he's in denial, maybe the solution is an idea he doesn't want to take on board. How ironic—

"What did I say? Just tell me."

"Your team suggested that just because SCP-3125 is the most powerful memeplectic threat ever observed doesn't mean it's the top of the hierarchy," O5-8 says. "You suggested that it would be possible to synthesise an idea an order of magnitude still more powerful than SCP-3125, specifically designed to neutralize SCP-3125, and under our control. A countermeme."

"That would take... That could be... possible," Hughes hazards. "It would be insanely dangerous. It would require tremendous resources. And ten to twenty years of real time work, completely uninterrupted. To avoid observation, we'd need to be hermetically sealed away from the exterior universe for that entire time. We'd need a lab as big as a Launch Arcology. *Wait a second.*"

His brain has just caught up. He realises the context in which he's saying these things. And he's been working for the Foundation for a *long* time.

"It's done," he says. "The lab, it's been built. It was built decades ago, in secret, and we put our best researchers inside it and now the work is done. That's what we're meeting for, now. We're ready to go. We're figuring out how to deploy the countermeme. That's brilliant! If I'm right, that's brilliant. Am I right?"

"Bart," Wheeler says. "When you joined the Foundation, you were taught that a day would come when you would have to, with very little preparation, sacrifice much or all of your existence to protect what most needs protecting. You've worked here for thirty years. And all of that time you knew that that sacrifice would be in your future someday. We were all taught the same thing."

It feels to Hughes as if a shadow falls over him. He looks at Michael Li, his director, who hasn't spoken yet.

Li says, "You're right that the lab is built. Construction was completed in the last forty-eight hours. The construction crew have been amnesticized and dismissed. But the work hasn't begun yet. That's what today's about."

Hughes says, "...That's where my people are."

"That's where your people are," Li says. "They're in the bunker, waiting. We have your cover story prepped. We're faking your death. It's time. You're going under now."

"Now? No. I... I doubt that."

"Your team volunteered. I took care of them myself. They're good people," Li says.

"Like hell," Hughes says, "did *I* volunteer for this."

Wheeler says, "Bart!"

Hughes says, "Any prior version of me who agreed to this was a God-damned moron, and I disavow his opinions. This is a prison sentence. I don't want to spend twenty years not able to see the Sun. I don't want to be buried alive in work. I have..."

He trails off, and stares through the table, eyes defocused. He was about to say, "I have family."

But he doesn't.

There's still his sister. She's Foundation, like him. But he can't talk to her, and she can't talk to him. They've tried.

He tries another tack. "This... has a low probability of success. The timeframes are bad. It's 2008. SCP-3125 will be here by the end of the 2010s—"

"It has an excellent probability of success," Graves says.

"Define 'excellent'," Hughes says.

"Better than fifty percent. *If* it's you." Graves produces a thick report which presumably backs him up.

Hughes peers at the document. He can see his own name on the cover. *God damn it.* Fifty percent is good. If he were anybody else in this room, he'd seize the chance with both hands.

Graves goes on. "*You* convinced *us* that this had to be done. And that you had to be at the center. You were prepared to make the sacrifice." He opens the document to a page in the back. The eyeball of his germ roves the page rapidly and finds the passage he wants. "Allow me to quote your own words to you: 'SCP-3125 represents an omniversal-scale threat. It threatens neighbouring realities to ours. It threatens microverses within our macroverse. It threatens universes which embed ours as fiction—'"

"Go ahead and think of it as a prison sentence, if it helps," O5-8 interrupts. "Rescind your consent if you'd like. But the next place you're going after this is the bunker."

Hughes glances around the room's walls again. He makes it too obvious what he's thinking.

"The door's locked, Dr. Hughes," O5-8 says. "You're not exiting until we're through here."

"What's the cover story?" Hughes asks. "How were you planning to do it?"

"A helium gas leak in S167-B03-312," Graves explains. "The leak will be real. There's a forged body in there already, impossible to distinguish from a real one. We've tampered with your public schedule for the day. It puts you in that room, not this one. As for—"

"He's stalling," O5-8 says to Graves and the others. "He doesn't need to

know any of this."

"Name somebody else," Li suggests. "Being serious. Who in the world, other than you, stands a credible chance of solving this problem? Who could we send instead?"

Hughes says nothing. There's nobody. Really, nobody in the world. And he *can* do it.

Li presses, "Is there anybody else? Even if they didn't want to. Who has the skills we need, who isn't already in the vault?"

The world shifts positions a little. Li's standing now. Wheeler looks around alertly, gripping the arm of her chair. She has a fountain pen in her fist, uncapped. It's like she just remembered something. O5-8 glances at Wheeler, puzzled at her reaction to, apparently, nothing. Hughes doesn't notice anything.

"It's just me," Hughes says.

"It's just you," Li says. "That's good enough for me."

"Hold on a second," Wheeler says.

Li pulls a gun out of nowhere. Hughes' germ's enormous pupils shrink to violet pinpricks.

This is no part of any plan, everybody in the room knows it. It's a real gun. It's impossible that he could have it. Wheeler starts to rise out of her chair. Her own sidearm is locked in a box outside.

Li aims at Bart Hughes' chest and fires twice. The first round pierces him in the lung. The second round, fired as Hughes collapses, nicks his laptop screen, which is bulletproof, and ricochets up into the meeting room wall.

*

Li turns, now aiming at O5-8. He gets two more rounds off, each causing an earsplitting electronic shriek and a flash of luminous green light as O5-8's protective ward absorbs the energy. Wheeler lunges at Li from behind his gun arm, deflecting it upwards with one hand while plunging the fountain pen into his throat with the other. Li

struggles. Wheeler pulls hard, opening his throat all the way up. Li's fingers loosen and she spirits the gun away. Li gurgles in agony and stumbles backwards, clutching futilely at his wound. He smashes his head — well, the germ he's wearing on his head — against a glass meeting room door, and slides down it into a spreading red lake. He's neutralized.

There are two seconds in which nothing happens.

O5-8's eyes meet Wheeler's. "Your thoughts?" he asks, urgently.

"Michael Li was compromised, I don't know how," Wheeler says. She makes the gun safe, holsters it and vaults over the table to check on Hughes. He's dead, she finds. Graves is dead too. When in the hell did Graves get hit? What just happened in this room? "This whole Site could be compromised from top to bottom—"

"I have follow-up questions," O5-8 begins. A bolt of lethally intense heat and light interrupts him, scorching the wall behind his head. He ducks.

Wheeler turns to track the source, aiming the gun with bloody hands. Something is lasering its way in through the containment unit airlock. It's a powerful laser, wielded with robotic precision. It's happening almost too fast to see.

"My personal security," O5-8 says. "It heard the shots."

"Call it off," Wheeler says. "If this unit is breached, SCP-3125 is coming for all of us."

"The unit's hermetically sealed. I can't send any kind of signal until the door's open."

"That's a problem—"

The airlock splits, and is torn away in segments. An enormous gloss black armoured mechanoid looms in the gap, crouched to peer into the room. It looks exactly as if O5-8's limousine got up and started walking. It's still impossible to guess whether there could be a human pilot inside it. Behind it, in the distance, Bochner is immobilised, sealed to one of the staging area chairs with a sizeable glob of transparent orange glue. She screams, "Help!"

For Wheeler, it feels as if a black wave rolls over her, pouring into the containment unit from outside. She drops the gun and raises her

hands. Being found holding the smoking gun isn't likely to be a good look, and she doesn't know for sure what heuristics, human or electronic or otherwise, control the mechanoid; it could be prone to making bad decisions.

"Stand down," O5-8 says to his bodyguard. It stops moving, but its single laser doesn't, flickering as fast as the eye can follow between four motionless targets: Wheeler, Hughes, Graves and Li. It's waiting for movement.

Li, not completely dead, twitches. The laser pulses once in retaliation, atomising his head and germ. The laser settles down to a shorter pattern, looping between the three remaining targets. Wheeler doesn't move a millimetre.

"I said, 'Stand down'!"

This time it seems to hear him. The laser clicks off and settles into a neutral position.

Wheeler relaxes. "Li was compromised," she says again. She hurries to the back of the room, where a medical kit is mounted on the wall. "We need to get you out of here. Then we need to sterilize the Site."

"Compromised when?" O5-8 asks. "By whom? I was given to understand that SCP-3125 rendered its victims wholly bodily subordinate to it, biologically incapable of doing anything but propagate its core concepts. But Li was still high-functioning."

"We've miscalculated something," Wheeler says. She throws most of the kit aside, keeping only a strangely-shaped capsule with a thin nozzle and pink fluid inside.

"And the gun? We were all searched on entry."

"I don't know." Wheeler can think of several ways to get the gun into room undetected. It could have been planted in the restroom by Li on a prior visit. Bochner could be complicit. Perhaps others. She thinks there's an extremely strong chance that the three members of Hughes' team have been murdered too.

It's all academic now. She applies the capsule to her right wrist and infuses the first half of the dose. It's fast-acting chemical amnestic. She hopes that splitting one dose between the two of them will be enough.

"Isn't this the part where SCP-3125 makes an appearance?" O5-8

suggests. "I certainly feel... something. In my head. My germ, I should say."

"Me too. Roll up your sleeve. You also need to deactivate your shield for a second." He obliges, and Wheeler gives him the rest of the drug. Wheeler sorely wishes the shields were standard issue, but they are exceptionally hard to come by, and there are serious controversies and side-effects associated with them.

Outside, Bochner has been gurgling and starting to speak in tongues. Now she screams again. When Wheeler looks, something long and dark, sharp as a javelin and bifurcating into filaments, descends from somewhere in the ceiling of the warehouse. It curls around the chair Bochner is glued to, and lifts her up into the air. A second thin feeler makes an appearance. It probes Bochner's glue-covered midsection, curiously, and then pushes itself through her, like a pin through paper.

She wails, litres of blood gushing out and splashing to the floor below her. The feeler withdraws, then makes a second hole beside the first, and continues in that fashion.

More spider legs impale O5-8's mechanoid bodyguard, and pull it away from the airlock, rapidly dissecting it into sparking pieces. The laser flashes wildly as the machine dies. It's no use.

In the distance, a site-wide containment alarm starts up.

"It's a memetic threat," O5-8 says, mostly to himself. "Where do the arachnoforms come in?"

"Do you have alternate transportation?" Wheeler asks.

"S167-B02-101, there's an escape pod," O5-8 says.

As he says it, Wheeler writes it down on her hand with her bloodied fountain pen. "Underground? You're sure? Is there a code for the door?"

O5-8 lists five digits. He clutches his head. His germ is twitching unhappily and changing colour and texture, as if an infection is spreading across its pale blue skin. "I can feel it. It's like— steel jaws. This is... most unpleasant."

"We need to get to the escape pod," Wheeler says. "There's nothing else that matters. We don't need to remember why. Got it?"

Spider legs reach into the airlock and begin tearing the room to pieces. They're fast-moving and grabby and angry. They know there's something important inside, but they can't get to it. The skull bone is too strong to be broken apart.

O5-8 doesn't have much field experience. The amnestic is blurring his thoughts. "I'm deferring to you," he says, dozily. "Escape pod. Lead on."

Wheeler takes his hand. She's got Li's gun in the other — a decent amount of ammunition left. "With me," she says. She's done this before. She doesn't know it.

The warehouse ceiling starts to cave in.

*

But what is it?

Where is it? What does SCP-3125 look like? Its motivation, its origins, its *modus operandi*— how much of that *can* be known? Does it have to be known, to solve the problem? Does it matter how intelligent the intelligence is, once it's inside the box, once it's checkmated?

And what actinic, mind-wrenching form could the countermeme take? How could human hands assemble something so devastatingly powerful and hold it steady; what human mind could wield it without exploding from the inside out? What would deploying that concept in anger do to human ideatic space? How far out from the solution is modern memetic science, a year, a century? What insane impossibility has Hughes just committed himself to?

He doesn't know anything. He knows Site 167 is coming apart, and something violent and psychotic is flooding its corridors and its people, a livid roving swarm which makes every human into the worst possible thing a human can be, a thing which *stands* wrong, which *looks wrong*, colourless and furious. He races down the corridors, and then down ventilation shafts which will take him deeper. He's small, and he has quick, slippery locomotion. He can make it. He can lock himself in.

He doesn't know what a germ needs to survive. All he's seen is the

cages. He doesn't know Bochner's care routine. Does it live in water, in *C. gigantes* blood plasma? Is it fed a formula? He needs to reverse-engineer his own biology before he starves. He doesn't know the model of his mind. It hurts to think.

But he can think.

Blood/Brain

There's no day/night cycle.

Something like a week into his trek, Wheeler realises that he can perform an experiment. He selects a building with a high ceiling to sleep in, a library. Before turning in, he sets up a Foucault pendulum. He suspends a heavy rock by wire from the ceiling and sets it swinging. The following morning, the slow pendulum is still swinging, and it has precessed. It's swinging at about a right angle from the mark he made before he went to sleep.

That means the world is still spinning.

On reflection, he doesn't know if it proves anything. It's not clear whether the Sun or the Moon still exist, or any celestial object at all other than the red-black eye socket at the horizon. The eye never moves. It casts long, threatening shadows, while being bright enough to blind Wheeler whenever he has to walk in that approximate direction, which is about half the time. Regardless of the physical evidence, it doesn't feel as if he's walking on a real Earth, or fully awake. He feels like an ant, crawling across the face of a rough-hewn monolith, crawling into and out of the runes chiselled into the face of that monolith, runes which form an unstoppable, apocalyptic mythology. He has migraines, and there are blotchy multicoloured zigzags in his vision by the end of most "days". He feels as if the whole world is perpetually dropping away from beneath his feet, like he and it are both plummeting into an abyss.

He has not been caught yet. The violent phenomena Ulrich warned him about have not appeared, which makes him feel increasingly lucky, and nervous. He carries a looted gun, which he's practiced with a little — he's a better shot than he would have guessed, using his right hand alone. (His left hand, the mangled one, does nothing but shake. He has to keep it clutched to his chest when shooting.) The gun gives him less reassurance than he'd like. It feels as if, were he to end up in a situation, it could metamorphose suddenly from a working firearm into a fiddly metallic liability, an explosive distraction in his pocket. On occasion, on the horizon, he sees a skyscraper-sized figure stalking past. He holds still, or hides, and it doesn't see him. Other than that, the world is seemingly deserted, standing empty, like an overturned car in a muddy ditch. Open doors, lights still blinking.

Wheeler feels... detached. Lucky. Guilty.

He keeps away from cities. He has not, yet, come within eyeshot of a sarcophagus — Ulrich was evasive in describing them, and advised him in the strongest possible terms to stay away from them. But on another "night", he selects a bad place to camp, where the wind and the local geography funnel the noise from one of the sarcophagi up to him from the valley. The noise, despite its faintness and distance, cultivates such intense and intolerable nightmares that he has to get up, pack up again and walk further away, as many more miles as it takes. The noise creates, in him, things which he dearly wants not to be flashbacks.

He goes into a shop and, along with packaged food and bottled water, steals a cheap digital wristwatch. It has a date function. Today is Monday the 17th of April; it's just gone lunchtime.

Time is still passing. On some level, all of this is factual. It's happening.

*

And if it's really happening, then, what?

There is no longer any ambiguity about *what*, specifically, is happening. Not in Wheeler's mind, or in anyone's. The world has long since passed through SCP-3125's antimemetic boundary layer and into its radioactive core. There is no longer a need for SCP-3125 to pretend that it is not what it plainly is. What else could it be? What difference could it make now, what could oppose it? It stands there in plain sight. Wheeler sees it. All of conscious reality sees it. It's happening everywhere, to everyone. It's not physically possible to conceive of anything else.

There is no worse case scenario than what's happening now. There's no race against time; there's no ticking clock; there's no last second, the last second was years ago. There's nothing to *avert*. This is it, the final game position, the highest and most refined form of human civilisation. This is the shape of the next million years.

SCP-3125 stands there. Monstrous, casual and indifferent.

And Wheeler is alone with his thoughts for a long period of time, and has little else to think about, and he wrinkles his brow, and he blinks a long blink, and looks again, and he realises what it was that he wasn't seeing—

SCP-3125 is *standing* there. Like a human stands.

*

He reaches Site 41 at the beginning of May. His body clock has wandered far out of skew by this point; it's technically around midnight when he first lays eyes on the place.

There is a protective field surrounding it, stamped into reality by the detonation of the antimemetic warhead, radiating out a few hundred metres beyond the Site's perimeter. It's a psychological repulsion, not a physical one. A thick bulwark of irrelevance. *There's nothing here. Just keep walking.* Despite being warned about it, Wheeler succumbs to the effect. Thirty minutes' walk down the road, he double-checks his map and realises what's happened and turns back. This happens a second time. On the third attempt, he makes it through. Dead reckoning and willpower.

For some reason, he had been imagining an ancient, dramatically overgrown ruin, but the containment breach which led to the Site's destruction happened only eighteen months ago, and the bomb blast which concluded the outbreak was figurative, not physical. About a third of Site 41's main building has been torn down, but the rest is perfectly intact and unmarred. Mother Nature has not reclaimed it. Gnarled trees are not sprouting from the damaged side.

Wheeler exhales. There is a still, safe atmosphere about the place. It's as if Site 41 has its own cool microclimate. It's easier to think. Even the light here is fractionally yellower, more natural.

The Site's main entrance is sealed with steel doors, but Wheeler circles around to the damaged side of the building, and is able to effect entry over the rubble. He moves at a medium-slow pace. He can't afford to blunder into anything, but if he goes too slowly, he knows, he'll overthink the situation, and become scared, and have to retreat all the way out of the building. The late Daisy Ulrich promised him that the Site was Safe. She then went to rather disconcerting lengths to explain

precisely what "Safe" meant. No entities capable of spontaneously, actively harming a person; no entities in need of active, dynamic containment procedures. A Safe SCP can be left in a dark, locked room indefinitely with no risk, she explained.

"`A nuclear bomb is Safe,`" she said, giving the canonical example.

"Well," he replied. "Up to a point."

The Site is Safe, he tells himself, creeping forward. The most dangerous things he's going to find are rats and— he jumps back, aiming his flashlight at a frightening shape— corpses.

The corpse is seated against a corridor wall. It's clutching a combat knife, which it seems to have buried up to the hilt in its own inner thigh, opening a gushing artery. Wheeler backs up against a wall, unable to look closely at the body but equally unable to let it out of his eyesight, in case it... does something. He feels faint. It doesn't help that at exactly that moment, the fluorescent lights in the corridor come up, triggered by his movement, giving him a much better look at the scene. The scene is about as bloody as any suicide can be.

"No, thank you," he says. He backs up. He backs all the way up the corridor and through the ruin to the virulent red place which passes for daylight, and there he throws up.

*

It takes a long time to talk himself back into it.

He finds many more bodies. Some of them are in groups, having died during violent altercations, or during more complex scenes which Wheeler cannot fully parse. Some of them are dismembered, or just scattered pieces. Some of them appear to have been dead for significantly longer than the rest; they are little more than wafer-thin skin wrapped around skeletons, and there are strange things written on the walls beside them. Wheeler never works out why.

There's still power. There's running water.

At first, nearly every door he meets is locked. But he steels his nerves, and returns to each of the dead Foundationers in turn, and retrieves

their keys and security passes. Soon, he has the run of the place, with only a few highly secure control rooms and containment units denied to him.

At this point, his task has become open-ended. If Hughes is not somewhere on Site 41 — which he almost certainly isn't — Wheeler needs to find information leading to his true location. He needs data.

He collects devices: phones and laptops and computer terminals, Foundation-built with chunky form factors. Most of them need passwords or PINs, which he can't get, but a few can be unlocked using security passes or biometrics, which he can get if he carries the device back to the relevant corpse and presents their face or finger to the scanner. The devices still have power, too. Wheeler is unable to find anything resembling a battery readout on any of them. He is slowly learning a key lesson: the Foundation builds things to *endure*. And though the Foundation as a group of people is absent, the physical systems they built are still here, and functioning, and ready.

The SCP database is the most obvious icon on every device's home screen. Ulrich told him to look out for a particular sigil, concentric circles with three inward-pointing arrows. Inevitably, like an uncounted number of newcomer Foundationers before him, Wheeler loses a significant number of hours browsing the entries. The Foundation has a specific and recognisable house style, which is to describe even the most mind-bogglingly weird anomalies in absolutely mundane, factual terms. Even heavily redacted — different users see different amounts of redaction, but there is plenty of data which he can't access no matter whose identity he uses — it makes for bizarrely compelling reading.

Hughes is mentioned numerous times in the database. He seems to have multiple overlapping research specialities, and is credited in many entries as a containment architect. Wheeler takes detailed notes, assembling a picture of the man's career progression... and then randomly stumbles into the Foundation's own personnel records for Hughes, which line up almost exactly with what he just worked out.

There are huge holes in the personnel record. The last entry relating to Hughes' actual activities is in 2007. And then in 2010, after a gap of years, there's a final note, a single unauthored sentence:

> It appears that those who know Hughes' fate meet it.
>
> **END OF FILE**

Wheeler frowns at the unhelpful note for a long minute. It reads like a riddle. Wheeler was, for a long time, a crossword puzzle fiend, but it seems improbable to him that a clandestine organisation like the Foundation would leave cryptic clues for one another, rather than clear, direct instructions. Which means the note is probably intended to be read simply and literally: *Don't look for Hughes unless you want to meet the same fate*.

Wheeler tilts his chair back and stares at the ceiling, contemplatively. On the other hand, the note also means:

Hughes can be found. It's been done before.

*

There's no day/night cycle, but he's worn out. His body is telling him that he needs to sleep. He sleeps on a sofa in an employee break room, on the far side of the building from the red eye. There's a snack machine, and there are snacks in the machine, but he doesn't have any cash. He considers breaking the glass, but if he screws it up and cuts himself badly there isn't a single doctor left in the whole world who could stitch him up. He considers, and rules out, looting the nearest corpse for a dollar.

As he tries to sleep, something comes to him, an acute, anxious energy. It grips him by the shoulder. *Get up,* it screams at him, distantly. *You cannot rest. Do the arithmetic. It's all still happening. MOVE.*

He rolls over and ignores it.

And it bothers him, intellectually, that he can ignore it. He wonders if there is some vital organ missing from his body. He should be quivering with anger and terror right now, yes? Why, in his heart, is he so calm?

He looks at SCP-3125, whose very existence, on paper, should paralyse him with fear. He looks at what SCP-3125 is doing, which should fill every fibre of his being with furious purpose. And he looks at his own significance to the whole endeavour, and his own guesstimate of the odds. He does the arithmetic. And the product of all those factors rounds down to damn near zero.

This isn't going to work. That's why.

This has to stop! It has to end! PLEASE!

Curled up in his sleeping bag, eyes screwed shut, Adam Wheeler mutters to whatever may be listening:

"It isn't going to work."

*

Near the site entrance — he can't figure out how to unlock the steel doors, even from this side — he finds a security office, with printed floor plans of the whole Site. He crosses off the rooms he's visited, and the rooms which are destroyed. Everything remaining is locked. Above ground, anyway. Underground, there are warrens of tunnels, and dozens more containment units. And, thirty floors below ground, a single incredibly large vault of unstated purpose. This final vault draws his attention in, magnetically.

Ulrich assured him that the Site was totally Safe.

As the freight elevator descends, Wheeler finds that a kind of anxious pressure is building above him. The air is rapidly getting warmer, and he's just realised that if the elevator breaks down right now, he'll likely be helplessly trapped, and die. He shouldn't have used it. He should have used the emergency stairs. Too late.

The elevator lands. There's an empty corridor. He follows it, drawn forward. There's an airlock at the far end, a wall of white metal big enough to drive a truck through. The airlock is closed, but there are seven or eight overlapping circular holes punched through it, making a combined gap which is easily big enough to admit a human. Beyond the airlock, there is a vast dark space. Wheeler has climbed through the hole and walked five paces out into the darkness before he even thinks about what he's doing.

There are shapes out there, illuminated by the scant light falling from the airlock corridor — lumps which could be more dead people. Wheeler's own shadow blocks much of the light. He takes out his torch. It is absolutely silent down here, and the temperature is uncomfortable, making him sweat. The rest of the huge vault, as far as

he can shine his light, is totally empty — but his torch is not powerful enough to illuminate a space this big, so it's hard to be certain.

He advances. A loud tone is building in his ears as he gets closer. There are... he counts... fourteen dead. Thirteen of them, dead in a rough circle around a fourteenth, a woman lying flat on her back. Just outside of the circle, there is a military truck with the inert remains of a complex machine mounted on its back. This, Wheeler surmises, is the antimemetic warhead. There is a cable leading down to a control unit lying on the floor, under the hand of the dead woman.

"Ah," he says, with a note of regret. "So you're the one."

Her security pass looks different from the others. It has a bright diagonal stripe across it in red and orange. He takes it. There's a roaring in his skull. He can't see it clearly at first — something is disturbing his vision, a gold-white spot in the corner of his eye, an artifact from the combination of extreme darkness and bright torchlight. He squints. It says "Marion Wheeler / Site Director".

He stares at it for a long time, weirdly disoriented. He doesn't exactly know why. It is, of course, a very commonplace name; if he stopped to gawp at every other Wheeler he met, he would never get anything done. Still, she's the one with her hand on the switch; she's the one who ended this local outbreak. Out of every dead Foundationer on this damned Site, she's the one who didn't die for no reason at all. He feels as if he should say a few words.

But they do not come to him.

He makes one quick circuit around the vault perimeter, scanning the floor and the wall, looking for anything interesting and finding nothing but construction tools and scaffolding. He returns to the airlock and then the freight elevator. He glares at it for a long, frustrated moment, and then accepts that it would be unsafe to use it again.

The emergency stairwell is perfectly well-lit, but thirty floors is a mountain. Three times on the way up, he has to stop to rest his knees.

*

The Site Director's pass gets him everything. Every control room, every containment unit, every file. He gets the whole story. He puts the last piece in place. He leaves a note, following the same hopeless, diligent ritual as the rest of the Antimemetics Division before him. He emerges from SCP-3125's "inverted containment unit" with extremely clear written instructions from himself to himself. He knows exactly where he needs to go.

As he moves down the forest road away from the Site, he reaches and crosses the edge of the antimemetic crater. He squares his shoulders, re-entering the presence of SCP-3125. His inner ear starts freefalling again.

"Where were you, just now?" someone calls out to him.

He stops walking. He squints into the intense light ahead of him, shielding his eyes. He can just about make out a figure standing there. The trees on each side of them rustle and move. They're too tall. Spider-scrapers. A wave of dread hits Wheeler, followed closely by one of perverse relief. This is it.

"Why can't I track you?" the unidentified man says. His voice sounds faint. "You're so *weak*, it's like you don't exist. I just wasted two days trying to pick you up again. What's wrong with you?"

Wheeler says nothing.

The man is closer. He didn't walk, but the distance between them halves, and his voice is easier to hear, though he is still too bright to look at. His body structure blurs and flickers. "You're not one of Them," he says. "And you're not one of Us. And you're definitely not the *hero*. You don't count for shit, memetically. Why are you wasting your time on this? Whatever the fuck this is. You should just kill yourself. It's not going to work."

Wheeler knows that.

The light collapses. The figure smashes into focus, becoming physical. It's a real human. A skinny twenty-something: scruffy, uncut hair and a sketchy beard. He is shirtless, and there is a deep, black pit in his clavicle, a hole where he has clearly been very badly wounded. Blood has run down his chest, soaked his jeans and forearms, and dried black. Fresh blood is still coming, building up thick layers, which shouldn't be possible. Wheeler doesn't spot the second hole in his gut, obscured by too much blood.

Wheeler is trying to keep his expression neutral, but he knows it isn't working. He can feel his left hand, his bad hand, starting to shake. A part of him *still* wants to ask the guy why. But there is no possible answer.

"This is what the human race really is," the man explains, spreading his hands to gesture at the whole world. "We lied to ourselves that we could be better, for thousands of years. But this is it. This is what we've always been. We've never been anything else."

"That's—" Wheeler begins, then stops, suddenly remembering something. He claps his left hand to his chest, draws with his right and shoots. It's a good shot. It's a lucky shot. It takes the man directly in the eyeball, and blows out the back of his skull. He falls, twisting as he falls, landing on his broken face.

Wheeler gasps, remembering to breathe. He almost drops his gun. He gets a tighter grip on it, keeping it aimed at the blasted ruin of the man's head. He wants to throw up. He controls himself. In through the mouth, out through the nose. He's okay. "Let him talk for too long," he says, apologetically.

He pulls out a Foundation brickphone from his pack. He pushes some buttons, entering coordinates, and then retreats far down the road. He retains visual contact with the dead man for as long as possible, then turns away and kneels, placing the phone on the road beside him. Following the detailed instructions he found in the control room, he grinds his palms into his eyes and presses his face against the ground. And he says:

"Aeloni zaenorae. Fire."

The orbital laser strike comes diagonally. It lasts for a split second, and is easily bright enough in the visible spectrum to have instantly blinded him if he were looking. When Wheeler returns to the scene, there's no body left. Just a scorched ellipse of asphalt.

He says, to the scorch mark, "I was going to say something along the lines of: 'That's a lie. That's what you are. You're the lie.' But, ah."

And if the bastard can regenerate from that, I'm done for, well and truly.

He looks up. The atmosphere isn't changing. The sky isn't returning to blue. There's still that heinous pressure. SCP-3125 remains the dominant force in the universe.

But as he turns, hearing movement in the forest all around him, he realises that the immense spider forms — he'd sincerely forgotten about them, they were standing there so quietly — are dispersing.

Tombstone

All memetic horror aside, Wheeler thought Site 41 seemed like a pleasant enough place to work, at least above ground. Decently spacious, if unattractive, offices; large windows, plenty of natural light, scenic forest views. Safe.

Site 167 is a hostile, sprawling industrial wasteland, four square kilometres of secure containment warehousing, research laboratories and administrative offices. Wheeler is put in mind of a fossil fuel power plant. The buildings are grim, functional and aggressively unattractive. There is no greenery. The ambient noise in the complex is a harsh roaring — it was built on a flat plain, and the wind races down concrete canyons and past sharp building edges.

Just over half of the site, Wheeler discovers, has been erased from the face of the Earth by an orbital laser strike. There is an *edge* where the intact buildings and roads abruptly end, and beyond that edge there is nothing but blackened, level wreckage. Wheeler guesses that the laser shut down mid-redaction when the site's antimemetic warhead was triggered, but he can't be sure of the exact chain of events. It doesn't matter. It doesn't significantly harm the odds. What he's looking for is below ground.

Wheeler is at his limit. He has travelled too far, and he has been travelling for too long. He cannot exist in SCP-3125's universe for much longer, sane. It is all still happening, and the fragile responsibility of being the only one alive who can do anything to stop it is like a steadily tightening vice around his skull. He is exhausted, and slowly losing his vision to bright migraines, and dismally lonely. No more detective work, no more Sites. This needs to be the end.

Between buildings 8 and 22E there is a vertical access point, a thirty-metre-wide hexagonal shaft with a yellow gantry crane across its mouth. The shaft was used for lowering construction machinery and materials into the site's extensive underground complex. The shaft is so wide and deep that it has strange effects on the movement of air near its lip. It feels to Wheeler as if it's trying to pull him down. There are metal stairs lining the inner wall of the shaft. He descends, and then follows his map into Site 167's underground complex. Unlike Site 41, this was certainly not a Safe site. There are warning signs everywhere, many of whose symbols Wheeler cannot immediately

parse. Very soon, he begins to encounter heavy bulkheads, sealed with electronic locks. Marion Wheeler's security pass opens them, every time.

Containment unit S167-00-6183's airlock is identical to the one he encountered at Site 41, just as the architectural diagrams suggested. The only difference is that this airlock is still visibly airtight — no holes. Wheeler swipes his card through the reader with a shaking hand. The door cycles open, revealing a sterile white antechamber, stale-atmosphered after years of disuse. He stands in the middle, waiting for the second half of the cycle.

This is it.

His heart is pounding. It's not good for him. He doesn't have a heart condition, that he knows of. But how would he know? Every living cardiologist is in hell.

He asks himself the final, worrying question, for the final time.

"But if you're here, Dr. Hughes, and you've built the machine, and the machine works: why didn't you come out?"

He answers himself, as a kind of inoculation against the bad news he knows is coming:

"Because the machine doesn't work. Because you couldn't build it. Because you're dead."

The inner door cycles open.

*

The atmosphere in the vault is tropically humid, and thick enough to taste. It tastes unpleasantly organic, like lymph or some other obscure bodily fluid. There are overhead floodlights, of which perhaps one in ten are still shining. There is junk everywhere. To Wheeler's left, there is a rough semicircle of monolithic autofactory units, each six or more metres tall, with piles of fabricated junk around them: furniture, tools, food containers, hard foam bricks, circuit boards, spools of fabric. To his right, stacked, stretching away along the long, concave wall of the vault, are hundreds of empty shipping containers. He would have to walk for ten minutes before he found one still containing raw

materials.

Ahead of him is a three-metre-tall wall of steel which curves away to the left and right, enclosing almost all of the vault's floor space. Just visible over the top of the wall, heaving slowly under the weak yellow light, is an immense, sleeping organism. From here, Wheeler can only see the curve of its back, which is a glossy, moist black, mottled with green. It is round, almost spherical, like an ice cream scoop of liver taken from a human two kilometres tall and dumped into this enormous — Wheeler gulps as he makes the association — Petri dish.

Wheeler does not notice the metre-thick pipes which run from the autofactories over the edge of the dish and in, providing various necessary liquids. He does spot the tall towers arranged around the organism, spraying a translucent mist down at it from all angles. Suspended from the ceiling to the left and right, roaring continually, are ventilation units as large as houses.

There is no one around.

Wheeler clears his throat and addresses the room, as loudly as he dares. "Is there a... Dr. Bartholomew Hughes in here?"

Nothing happens. The roaring of the ventilation units continues. The organism continues to heave slowly.

Wheeler raises his voice somewhat. "I'm looking for a machine called an—"

It wakes up.

"—irreality amplifier?"

The thing turns, pushing huge volumes of fluid around its dish, enough that a wave of it sloshes viscously over the side of the wall. It lurches up to the wall. As more of it becomes visible, it becomes clear that there is little more to its body plan than what was already visible. Aside from stubby flippers, it is simply a huge, near-spherical lump of biology. It seems to peer eyelessly at Wheeler.

Wheeler concludes that he does not wish to be here. He turns to leave, and is startled to discover that the airlock door has closed behind him, as silently as it opened. "Ah." The airlock controls are to one side. He does not run, for fear of attracting attention with sudden movement, but he walks over, briskly, and pulls out his stolen security card again. As he's about to swipe it through the reader, a stringy red web lashes

out from nowhere and restrains his wrist, preventing him from proceeding.

Wheeler struggles for a second to pull his arm free, but the webbing is gluey and has a freakish rigidity to it, as if there are bones inside it. It won't let him move. He glances back, and doesn't get a good enough look at the organism's body to spot where the web originated. The organism has opened its eye now, a single eyeball tens of metres wide, which must account for a significant fraction of its body volume. It has a vivid pink iris, and four enormous, black pupils.

Its voice isn't truly audible. It arrives in Wheeler's head like maddening static, a mosquito's whine in stereo.

DO YOU HAVE IT

"Have what?"

NO DOCTOR. NO MACHINE

A thinner strand of webbing shoots out, attaching itself to the security pass in Wheeler's hand, plucking it delicately from his fingers. The strand withdraws and holds the pass in front of the organism's eye.

WHEELER

"Ah," Wheeler says. "Yes, it's something of a coincidence actually—"

The strand tightens, lifting Wheeler by his arm. He twirls uselessly, barely able to see what's happening. There is a blur of luminous pink, and he is plunged, screaming, directly into the largest of Bart Hughes' four pupils.

*

The bunker was empty when he got there. His associates were missing. He was forced to presume them dead. And, in a rare lapse of forethought, he had neglected to bite off one of his human body's fingers before fleeing the scene of the shooting. With no human tissue sample to work from, he had no way to clone himself a replacement body. He was, he realised, trapped.

Wheeler had told him that, to protect the cause of the Foundation, he

would have to sacrifice much or all of his existence. And she had only been reminding him of something which he had always known, intellectually. Still, he had not imagined *this*. And even if he had, he could never have imagined what this would be *like*, to experience from the inside. Several times, he came close to quitting. Dysmorphia alone almost killed him.

But. He had a duty. The problem had to be solved.

He attacked it in his germ form for over a year. He developed tools for himself, computer peripherals and writing implements adapted for his short but dextrous tendrils. He built miniature chair-analogues and other furniture. He developed, for himself, a little life. A fitness plan. Some hobbies, even. He slept in baths of nutrient sludge.

Before the end of the first month, he had proven to his satisfaction that the countermeme he was searching for existed beyond the comprehension of human intellect. A human being's mind would figuratively burst into flame upon contact with it; it was quite possible that their literal body would too, as a violent reaction to the profound, unalterable wrongness of every aspect of the universe around it. To create the countermeme, he would need to start from a human carrier of a suitable, "single-celled" base idea, and amplify that idea artificially using a machine.

By the second year he had designed and built enough of the machine to know that the machine could not be built. Theory and practice were diverging too far. Tests were failing in troubling ways, which pointed to fundamental architectural misconceptions. His machine would not and could not do what it was designed to do. He scrapped all of his schematics. He needed a different approach.

(There is a struggling figure mounted on the back of his retina, drowning beneath yellow pinpricks of focused light, drawing oxygen from his bloodstream and firing back minuscule thoughts. The figure is losing his mind with fear and revulsion, though he is a little more resilient than he gives himself credit for, and he is adapting. "It's you," the little man manages to gurgle. "There's no amplifier. You're the amplifier.")

He sequenced, and then reverse-engineered, his own genetic code. He built life support equipment, and re-architected the interior of the vault — which had always been the plan, if not to this extent. He refactored his physiology, in stages, over the course of years, until his brain was of a size and complexity to think monumental, radical,

irreducibly complex thoughts.

("But why didn't you?" the speck asks. "You could have opened the vault at any time. What were you waiting for?")

Once, while exploring human ideatic space, he saw himself. He created a rudimentary memetic descriptor of himself, refined it, focused, guessed a little, and there he was: a complex of brilliant lights in the shape of a man, amid a swarm of similar people, living and dead and real and fictional. It was fascinating, and sobering, to see himself in that grand context, from that elevated perspective. He was tiny. He waved. He waved back.

And when he saw himself, he came to understand what he was; what his role was. He was the mad technical genius, the crazed inventor who architects the final weapon. But he was not the one to wield it. The spark, the base idea he needed to amplify, was not in his head, and was not in the vault with him. Mathematically, it never could have been. That was not the shape of things. It had to be delivered by someone else.

(The speck stops struggling. He has looked, with some effort, to his left and his right. He has now, finally, seen that there are other figures mounted here with him on the retina, older figures who have mostly been interpolated into the membrane, and no longer have independent life or thought. This causes him no small amount of alarm. He says: "...By who?")

Hold still.

(The speck's brain explodes, like a diagram.)

*

There is a forest.

There is a nice big house in the forest, and a garden behind the house, a trimmed lawn encircled by tall conifers. There is a rough circle of chairs on the lawn, and about twenty-five people seated or standing around or chatting in groups, with drinks and burgers, and there is a queue for the barbecue. There is a tall column of smoke rising from the barbecue. It is an outstandingly beautiful day, and nothing terrible

is happening at all.

Adam Wheeler knows he is broken now, because he can't accept the scene. It's too sudden, and too pleasant, to be real. He feels normal, clean and healthy. He gasps and almost cries when he realises that his hand is back.

Someone walks up to him, offering a handshake. "You must be Adam. It's a pleasure. Bart Hughes."

Hughes is a very youthful fifty, short and skinny, with thick-lensed, thick-rimmed glasses and a flurry of wild, greying hair. Wheeler shakes his hand, more or less automatically; in his other, he has a bottle of beer. "I work at the Foundation," he says. "Obviously. Containment architecture, biomemetics, a whole mess of odd jobs."

"Hughes," Wheeler repeats. "I was— er, looking for you."

"You found me," Hughes says. "Good job."

"...What is this?"

"I didn't think you'd remember. This is where we met. Originally, I mean. Briefly. We shared about ten words, maximum, and I don't remember a single one of those words, and I barely remember you either, no offense. But I remember the barbecue, and I definitely remember *that* I met you at the barbecue. So, I figured it would be a more agreeable setting for the conversation we need to have."

Wheeler does not recognise the scene, either the location or any of the people. "This is your memory?"

"Yeah. Come on, let's talk."

Hughes leads Wheeler across the lawn and selects a pair of chairs in the sun. He sits, and gestures for Wheeler to sit across from him. Wheeler does so, uneasily. Hughes rests his elbows on his knees, and gathers his thoughts before he begins speaking.

"Adam, you don't have the idea we're looking for. The seed for the countermeme. You're the wrong guy.

"You would know if you had it. It would be impossible not to know. You would feel electrified by it. Driven forward by the high ideal it represented, every waking moment. It's what *should* have brought you here. I don't know how you made it here without it."

"...I didn't know I was supposed to bring an idea with me."

"There's no way you could have known," Hughes reassures him. "Nobody exterior to the vault knew. I didn't know it myself until I was already locked in. This is normal. We form these plans, and something unexpected happens, and the plans go out the window. And, under great pressure, we are forced to demonstrate creativity."

Wheeler takes a deep breath. He squares his shoulders. "Alright. Where is it? I hope it's in North America. I don't want to have to go all the way back to Site 41. But I will. If you can wait that long."

Hughes is shaking his head. "You can't do it. Even if it was that simple, and there was just a *place* I could send you to collect it, like takeout... you can't carry an idea like this. You've never had that capability. You don't believe. You've never had to. You're the wrong guy."

"...So where does that leave us?"

Hughes turns, looking meaningfully toward the barbecue itself. Wheeler follows his gaze. There is a woman tending it, with her back to them, chatting with the people in line for food. She seems to be the centre of attention.

"Marion," Wheeler says.

"She had it," Hughes says. "Well, to speak accurately, there's no singular *it*. It's a massively diverse phase space of possibilities. Millions of people in the world had different ideas which could have worked. But she was one of them."

"Was," Wheeler says.

"Yeah. She died."

Hughes turns back to face him. He hesitates, drinking some more beer while he chooses his words. He is not a medical doctor. He does not have anything which could be considered a bedside manner.

"Adam," he says. "I've been examining your brain. There are layers and layers of damage there, and a lot of it looks deliberate. Some of it may even be self-inflicted. You have had memories suppressed, and restored, and falsified and erased again, and on top of that you've survived what should have been fatal exposure to SCP-3125, *and* you've been through a great deal of completely non-anomalous trauma. So... you would be forgiven for not having worked it out by

now. The hole in your life."

"No, I know," Wheeler says.

With some caution, Hughes asks, "What do you know?"

"She and I were married at one point. Right?"

Slowly, Hughes nods.

Wheeler says, "I got there eventually. It felt stupid and obsessive at first, to draw that conclusion. Self-absorbed. But there were all these *facts*, and they all *fit*. At the end of the day, I had to accept it."

Hughes asks, "And how do you feel about that?"

Wheeler interlocks his fingers, distractedly. He doesn't know. He doesn't know if he wants to know. He's afraid to know. "So what if we were married? What does that give me? It's over. It's all gone."

"...Could be," Hughes says.

"What was she like?"

Hughes holds something out to him. It is an autoinjector pen, a stubby, luminous orange cylinder with a pointed cap concealing a needle. There is a fat black Z printed on its side. Wheeler recognises it.

In fact, he recognises it as his own. But he finds himself not able to recall where he acquired it. Or for how long he has been carrying it.

This drug, he knows, will kill him. It will make him remember everything — *everything*. And this will kill him, as it does everybody.

But he will remember.

There is a kind of singing in his ears. The sunlight in the garden is blurring, smearing out. He catches Hughes' eye, and Hughes is smiling ruefully, and his eye has lit up, a scintillating gold-white point of light.

*

This needs to be the end.

There are long, long months of fearful migraine wandering. There is the face-to-face back in the school, mediated by the late Daisy Ulrich, so brief and extraordinarily painful that it registers like a gunshot. And then he is enmeshed within SCP-3125 again, complicit and actively engaged in a darkened, metallic hell. The drug makes it impossible to not think about what happened, to not stare directly at what he did. Time in there is dilated, stretched to subjective breaking point by the anomaly's mass. It seems to last tens of years. And then, the chisel.

And after that, for two years, he is vacant. He is a suit wrapped around a torn, ragged-edged hole. And then there is Marion, at last, placidly tearing herself out of his life and him out of hers. And then it's hours earlier than that, the very worst moment, his awful sinking realisation that she no longer knows who he is.

And then it's two days before that. It's six-fifteen in the morning, October, pre-dawn and freezing cold. Marion is at her car door, about to leave for work but distracted by something important on her work phone, and Adam is lingering on the porch, seeing her off. He has a work trip of his own, tonight and tomorrow night, so this is the last time they'll see each other until—

This is the last time they'll see each other. This is it.

He digs his heels in, dragging the regression to a straining halt. He calls out, "Marion!"

She puts her phone away. She turns around.

It's her, the whole of her. She is precisely the way he remembers her. She *is* the memory, iconic and brilliant. She smiles at him, for a long, ridiculous moment.

She says, "Do you get it, now?"

"Why you kept me away from all this? *Yes.*" He goes to her, and they kiss, and it's a classic, it's perfect, it's everything either of them remembers. He holds her tightly, and she hugs him back, head heights as mismatched as ever. He sniffs.

"You've had a hell of a time," she states. It is a simple fact.

"I needed you," he says. "I didn't even know how badly. I didn't need you to *help* me, I just needed to stand aside and let you do the job instead. Marion, your job is lunacy. I one hundred percent understand

why you tried to keep me out of this half of your life, for so long. And I will never ask about it again."

She looks up at him. It looks like she's about to say something, but the pain in Adam's brain makes itself known again, and he has to break off. The pain is forcing its way forward, into the back of his eyes. The rate of regression is increasing again. Different memories from all parts of his life are clamouring at him now, and their combined volume is increasing, and it is becoming difficult to think clearly. Marion, though, is part of most of the memories. Not a constant — she has evolved and grown, over years — but a common thread. He focuses on her.

"I don't have a lot of time to bring you up to speed," he manages. "This isn't real. We're both sharing Bart Hughes' mind right now. I don't know how much you know—"

"There's an (anti)memetic monster called SCP-3125," she says. "It killed me, and the Division, and the Foundation, and now it's occupying our whole reality. It ruins humans. It's the worst thing that's ever existed. There's no one left but you and you can't stop it. You can't even look at it. Hughes needs an idea to amplify, so you took a lethal dose of biochemical mnestic to reify me properly, because I was the best idea you had. Does that cover it?"

Adam grins weakly, with great relief. His wife has caught up characteristically quickly. "Just about. We live in ridiculous times."

She steps back from him. She looks at him, and at herself, and at their fictional little scene, steadily brightening as the Sun rises.

She looks "up", at the unimaginably gigantic memeplex which she has to kill. Inside its maw, human existence, all humans and all things humans have ever done, said, thought or been, are burning alive. SCP-3125 is, in large part, the lie that SCP-3125 is inevitable, and indestructible.

But it *is* a lie.

She feels it, now. She knows in her bones that she is *irreal*; an animate memory; an ideal, an abstract. When she started to exist a few moments ago she was mostly realistic, but she can feel flaws and complexity being stripped away from her. She can see the shape of the idea complex which Hughes is assembling around her. It looks familiar. It looks like a heavily reworked slice through the concept of the Foundation itself. The Foundation's noblest intentions and

achievements, at least. The best purpose of its existence: to protect people. To swallow up all the horror, to manage it and understand it, to keep it under lock and key, so that *people don't have to be afraid*.

"Adam," she says, looking up again. "It's going to work. I can see all the way to the end from here."

"That's good," he manages. "It's been a long time since I had good news." He falls to his knees. His skull feels as if it's splitting open. She kneels with him, taking one of his hands.

He is seeing things, and the things he is being forced to see are hurting him. SCP-3125 has been hacking away at his and her lives for far longer than he knew. They'd lost so much by the end. He had no idea. And it's not just him, he realises. It's everybody. He needs to multiply this feeling by billions. "You've got to end this thing," he says, the pain rising to a flashpoint. "It has to be today. No more."

"Adam, listen. It's a different kind of existence up there. I've seen glimpses of it before, but I've never *been* there. I don't know what it's going to be like, but I know I won't be a human anymore. I'm already not real. I won't be able to come back. I love you."

There is a burning, corrosive sensation crawling across the surface of Adam's brain, a crackle like cellular automata. "I know," he says. "It's okay. There's going to be no one to come back to. It was good to see you. I love you."

STAND BACK

She stands back from him. She flexes what could be wings.

"You used to sing," Adam says. "All the time. It's the first thing it took away from us. But I remember."

The launch window opens. There is a kind of *ignition*. And Marion Wheeler's perspective shifts, and everything seems to shrink, and she is on the ascent.

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The part of SCP-3125 which was capable of communication has had its brains blown out. There is no longer anything to reason with. There

is no quip. There is a song, but it's a song she sings for herself.

The thing is titanic in its structure, brain-breaking in its topology. It comes from a space where ideas exist on a scale entirely beyond those of humans. Its wrongness and its self-consistent evil are so profound that it hurts to comprehend. At first, looking directly at it causes stinging actinic flashes in Marion's eyes, like ionising radiation.

But her perspective is still shifting, because she's still ascending. And as she ascends, ceasing to be human, she sees through the adversary, and comes to understand, instinctively, how it is structured, and how it is *faulty*, and how those faults can be attacked.

It turns to face her.

When they meet, what happens is less a fight than it is mathematics, an equation settling at the end of a long, painful stretch of working, a blizzard of cancelled terms. In the presence of WILD LIGHT, vast tracts of SCP-3125, thought to meaningfully exist, prove not to. It is, in the new context which WILD LIGHT provides, an ancient irrelevance. It folds up, limb after branching limb winking out of existence. It releases its grip on everything human. The mathematics is good. It happens in exactly the way Hughes modelled it, back in the bunker, using the memetic equivalent of fluid dynamics equations, taking thousands of processor-years to simulate.

After the finger limbs are gone, a livid red/green eyeball remains. The Foundation/Wheeler/protection abstract punctures it, lasering straight through it from front to back. A colourless shockwave spreads through the eyeball interior, another quiet cancelling-out, leaving bright vacuum behind it, not even particles.

And all that is left from the collision is the balance: a final wild photon, outbound to the deepest limit of ideatic space, never to return.

Epilogue

"...And what have we learned?"

It takes O5-8 a significant amount of time to answer his own question. He speaks with a measured, level tone. He is in no hurry.

"We have learned that there is time missing from our world. Almost a year of extremely recent history. And there are spaces, significant spaces, in every population center, which cannot be perceived or entered. The cities are rerouting around them, like mountains or radiation zones. And along with that time and that space, we have learned that there are enough people missing, without any explanation whatsoever, that if I spent the rest of my considerably augmented lifespan counting them, I could not count to that number."

He pauses.

"And outside of the Noöspherics Division," he says, "no one, not a single person, is even aware of these... thefts. Even those in the Division, who made this discovery, cannot recall what happened during that missing time. And no one can enter that missing space. The gap in reality, itself, can barely be perceived. It is this... shocking, blinding absence. This unknown unknown.

"We have learned — we have cautiously hypothesized — that three to four years ago an unimaginable anomaly entered our reality. And then, some time later, it left, taking all of that space, and all of that time, and all of those people with it. We do not know what it was, or what it did. We have tried to find out, but the truth evades my best noösphericists. The question fights back, as if it doesn't want to be answered. And we do not know why the anomaly left, though my experts say that in the conceptual realm, there is evidence — traces — of what could have been a conflict. And in the distance, shining down on us, there is a great new star."

He hesitates.

"Even I don't remember what happened," he continues, with his voice lowered. "Which I, personally, find... deeply alarming. Because this is recent history. Like nearly everybody alive, I must have *been there*. In some respect, I must have gone through it.

"But if we have learned nothing else, we have learned this: humans can walk away from, and forget, *anything*. Civilization can go back to 'normal' after *anything*."

He sits in contemplative silence, for some time. He stares at nothing. He worries, briefly, that he really does know the truth, and that there is nothing anomalous preventing him from knowing it. That it's simple denial. But he won't say that aloud, even here.

He says,

"And I wonder: what was the Foundation's role in this? Were we witness to this anomaly? Were we the ones who defeated it? Did we resist? Negotiate? Participate?

"We are here, now. Intact. We are *back*. To what do we owe that? Did we hide, or run?

"Do we deserve to be back? Have we that right? We failed in our stated objective. These people are gone, and it's useless to pretend that they aren't dead. We failed orders of magnitude harder than we've ever failed before. Despite which, we remain clandestine, and unknown to greater humanity. Which means that no one external to the Foundation can ever hold us accountable for our actions, or lack thereof. If what happened at the O5 Council meeting yesterday is any indication, we will certainly never hold *ourselves* accountable.

"What happened to those people? *My* people. Where are they? No one is *just* dead, no one is merely, *passively* dead. Death is *caused*."

SCP-055 cannot answer him.

He says, his voice rising, "These things happen. And we say to ourselves, 'Never again.' And a hundred years pass. And they *happen. Again.*"

He says, "Last time. The time before this one, the time *none* of us remember, the time for which there is *no* evidence of any kind, but which I now realise must exist. That time, when we told ourselves and each other, 'We must do better,' what did we do differently, from then on, and why didn't it work?"

He says, "What does the Foundation need to be? *Where* does it need to be, and how far is that place from here? Can we see it from here?

"Or is this it?"

He does not know.

And after leaving the containment unit, he knows, he will not even remember the questions.

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Direct observation is harmful to Nema's species. Her mother died when she was a juvenile, killed instantly when a Foundation researcher took a close-up flash photograph of her face. The Foundation thinks her whole species is extinct, wiped out by infertility and disease, as an indirect result of excessively close Foundation study.

But they are not extinct. Some of them adapted. They fled, across oceans and then inland. They grew thicker antimemetic armour.

Nema is a fully-grown adult *C. gigantes*, a massively vertically elongated quadruped, almost a kilometre tall at the shoulder. As O5-8's motorcade leaves Site 19, she is standing just beyond the Site's perimeter, with a crumpled metaspider in her mouth. She is unable to perceive the motorcade or the Site itself, any more than any human Foundationer can perceive her. They only barely walk the same earth.

The spider is a two-hundred-metre-long bundle of legs, eyes and chitin, long body parts dangling from each side of Nema's jaws. The spider convulses ineffectually. It can't escape. It is the last one. The spiders were numerous, and tasty, but the Ones Who Walk Very Slowly have a broad diet.

Nema bites down, biting through the last of the spider's legs, which begin an achingly slow tumble to the ground, accompanied by a gout of bug juice. Nema tosses the spider's mauled thorax in the air and catches it in the back of her throat. She gulps it down, mostly whole, still twitching. She raises her head and vocalises triumphantly, a deafening, inaudible, infrasonic warble. The call carries all the way to her mate and children, on the horizon.